

Re:Zero The King of Pride

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Author: hollowsong16

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Summary: Subaru was so sure he was going to be the hero here. Luckily something wants him to be. Something wants him to be just as important as he always dreamed of being. It even wants to give him a throne. When Emilia is about to be disqualified from the royal selection Subaru comes up with a clever plan to keep her in the contest by courting the beautiful half elf.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

I've never actually written a fanfic before. I always felt that any time I wasn't developing my own IP was time wasted. But I am pretty obsessed with Re:Zero and I had fun writing this. I started out with a goal to do two things: to develop better characterization for Subaru and Emilia, and to focus more on the romance angle. I think I did ok with the second one but the first was likely a complete failure.

After reading all the web novels I feel like the story of Re:Zero kind of got lost. I'm not really sure where it's going or if it's building up to anything. I was expecting Subaru to go through a standard hero's journey and get more powerful. Honestly by Arc 4 I expected that the ending would have Subaru having gathered all nine Authorities and Emilia becoming the new witch of Envy. I thought that Reinhard would try to kill Emilia 'for the greater good' and Subaru would be determined to stop him. I figured that this would be the ideal ending for a hero's journey because by the end, the weak loser has actually earned his power and is ready to fight the raid boss for the sake of the woman he loves. I know this isn't going to happen and honestly the way Subaru stayed weak after consuming three different authorities is starting to feel pretty contrived to me.

The other problem I'm having with the series is that the romance angle between Emilia and Subaru doesn't get enough focus. Emilia is Subaru's motivation. Almost everything he does he does because he loves Emilia. However, seven arcs in and that romance really hasn't progressed beyond one kiss and Emilia still hasn't made sense of her feelings. She doesn't have to sleep with him but the relationship does need to develop further even if just on an emotional level. I know that she's emotionally a child (and really, why? Why add that to her character? Can we get any love interests in this series that aren't some kind of loli?) but if the author chooses to make a romance the main character's entire motivation, then he really needs to devote serious time and effort to that romance. We as the audience need to feel why this girl is worth dying for (repeatedly). Otherwise the romance feels undefined and that makes the main character's motivation feel contrived and arbitrary. The other problem I have with the state of the romance is that I don't feel like it fits Emilia's character as it has been described. Emilia is a powerfully lonely person. She's been alone with Puck most of her life and now Puck is gone. I would have expected Emilia to be super love hungry and desperately anxious to leap into a relationship with someone she trusted as soon as Puck left. I'm sure it would have been a very juvenile relationship, limited to holding hands or something, but given everything we know about Emilia I think it would have made more sense for her to become openly possessive of Subaru, once she was given permission by him to feel that way, than for her to keep him at arms length while she sorts her feelings out.

Anyway, I really did have fun writing this and I hope you enjoy it. I'd love to get some feedback on the story.

*** Note there is no Return by Death in this story ***

When Subaru Natsuki opened his eyes, he was standing on a busy street. Wagons pulled by strange animals trundled slowly up and down the road and people in bizarre clothing walked by. The people's outfits were like something out of a renaissance fair, mostly robes and smocks. Several of the people who walked by Subaru gave him a side-eye as they passed.

Where am I? How did I get here?

"That man is dressed funny, Momma!" A boy laughed, pointing at Subaru. There was no malice in his mirth, he was

simply too young to know better.

"Be quiet, Shinji," The woman holding his hand ordered sternly.

Subaru stared at them. The child appeared to be wearing some kind of 'cat ear' headband. Nothing terribly odd about that except for the fact that he had apparently convinced his mother to put on a similar headband since she had cat ears as well. Were they playing a game or going to a comic-con?

The mother forcefully pulled her son past Subaru, glowering at him in suspicion. Subaru only belatedly realized that the way he was staring at the pair in fascination might well have been considered threatening. The boy, Shinji, sensed nothing wrong and waved at Subaru as he and his mother hurried past. The mother continued to glower at Subaru, flicking her ears in disapproval before turning away.

Wait a second... she had *flicked* her ears? Were those ears real?!

Subaru, his eyes wide, looked more closely at the crowd. Now that he was paying more attention, he realized that lots of people in the crowd didn't look human. They had fur and animal ears and one fellow approaching him right now had an entire wolf's snout covering his face!

The wolf-faced man glowered at Subaru. "You got a problem, buddy?" He snarled. Subaru decided that it really was a snarl when a person opened a mouth that was full of sharp teeth.

Subaru realized that he'd been staring in open-mouthed wonder at the wolf-man and hurriedly shook his head 'no.'

The wolf-man snorted, "I thought not," He turned and slunk up the road, grumbling to himself.

Subaru's feelings of shock slowly transformed into wonder.

Wait a second... I'm really in another world! I'm not the loser I was back home anymore! This is my big chance! I've been summoned here by some kind of destiny! I'm finally going to be worth something, people aren't going to sneer at me or shake their heads with pity when I walk by. I'm not just a NEET. I'm going to wow the people, defeat the Demon King, and marry the beautiful princess! I don't believe it, my every dream is coming true! I'm not a loser anymore!

A feeling of intense joy welled up in his heart. Subaru felt like he wanted to embrace this whole world, if only he could spread his arms wide enough. Subaru couldn't hold it all in: He started to laugh out loud, ringing peals of pure joy.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you alright?" A courteous voice asked.

Subaru quickly came down from his natural high and discovered that a small crowd had gathered around him. The locals were all staring at him with a mixture of concern and trepidation. The only exception to this was the man who had actually spoken: a tall, handsome young man with bright red hair and a demeanor that could only be described as 'polite.' He wore what looked like some kind of uniform and he had a sword belted at his side. The man was looking at Subaru with a mix of kindness and concern.

Subaru folded his arms behind his head and laughed again.

Awesome. Maybe this guy is going to be my first companion on a daring adventure to save the world. I really thought that finding my first companion would have been harder. I better put on a good show to impress him. That should be easy at least, I'm feeling so high-on-life right now that I don't know if I could worry about anything if I tried. I'm not a loser, I'm the fucking hero!

"I'm great!" Subaru said in a cheery voice. "I'm having the best day of my entire life!"

The small crowd that had gathered around Subaru was dispersing, although not without a few rolled eyes. They were either departing out of boredom or simply because they trusted that the redheaded man had the situation well in hand.

The man smiled at Subaru. "I am most happy to hear it. My name is Reinhard van Astrea. Might I have the pleasure of knowing yours?"

"I'm Subaru Natsuki and it is an absolute pleasure to meet you!" Subaru enthused, watching the passing throng of humanity with bemusement. "I'm new in this land, I have no money, no friends, no idea where I'm sleeping tonight, and *absolutely* no idea what I'm doing!" Subaru laughed.

Reinhard's face grew more concerned. "That sounds... truly terrible," He said, uncertain whether or not to be sympathetic. This 'Subaru' was saying horrible things with a smile on his face. Reinhard concluded that the young man was either suffering from a mental breakdown or he possessed a truly remarkable kind of fortitude.

Subaru gave Reinhard a deprecating smile. "Yeah. It's a little rough but I'll bounce back, don't worry. It's just going to take me a couple of days to get myself situated," Subaru shrugged.

It's not like I really have to worry, Subaru thought to himself. This world is set up just for me. It's a place where I can show off my true potential. I mean, I'm sure the first few levels or chapters or however you want to look at it will be kind of rough, but that'll just be good training. I hope I can get started with the main plot quickly.

Reinhard's eyes widened. "I truly admire your confidence, Master Natsuki. I doubt that I could have such optimism or conviction were I to find myself in similar straits." Reinhard knew that everything good about him came directly from his innumerable Divine Blessings that granted him his magical powers. No one needed to tell him that he would be all but worthless without them, although no small number of people *had* said that to his face over the years.

Wow, Subaru thought. *This guy sounds as insecure as I am. I mean... as insecure as I used to be; I'm better now. Anyway, the guy seems like he needs some sympathy. I'd probably want to cheer him up anyway but if he is going to be my first companion on my quest then I should definitely try to bond with him. He just stands out from the crowd a little too much to simply be another background character. He's probably going to be intimately involved in my own role as the hero. Besides, he really seems like a genuinely nice guy and we all need a little support every now and then.*

Subaru shook his head with a grin. "Hey, buddy, don't sell yourself short! Oh, and please call me Subaru, if you say 'Mister Natsuki,' I think you're talking to my Dad. Anyway, you should have more faith in yourself. Honestly, I felt the same way about myself not so long ago. You never know what you're capable of until you're put in the right situation."

Reinhard couldn't help smiling back. "I thank you for your kind words, Master Subaru," Reinhard said. "You mentioned that you were new in the city and have nowhere to sleep tonight. I'd be only too happy to offer you lodgings while you become settled here." He paused, absently touching the satchel hanging at his side. "Unfortunately, my... father has requested that I deliver these parcels to his various acquaintances today and I must comply. Should you visit my home this evening, I would be most delighted to host you."

Oh? I guess he'd not joining my party right now. Too bad. Maybe the main quest doesn't involve him yet, not that I know what the main quest actually is. No biggie. I set the flag. I'm sure that he'll pop up again when the plot is ready for it. I might as well head off and see how I finish this prologue.

"That sounds great, Reinhard. I'm certain we'll meet again very soon and I am totally looking forward to it!" Subaru said, knuckling Reinhard's shoulder with a fond laugh as he walked away, searching for the next plot line.

Had Subaru bothered to look behind him as he walked away, he would have seen Reinhard's face grow worried and indeed alarmed. Reinhard possessed well over a hundred Divine Blessings, more than anyone else in the world. To call Reinhard the single most powerful being on this planet would not have been inaccurate. When Subaru had touched him, two of Blessings had immediately triggered: specifically the Divine Blessing of Judgment and the Divine Blessing of Empathy.

The Divine Blessing of Judgment had always been a valuable tool for Reinhard because it enabled him to know what special abilities a person possessed. It gave him perfect insight into what options an opponent possessed in battle and the relative power of that opponent. Knowledge is power in combat, and perfect knowledge provides ultimate power.

Reinhard had no intention of using any of his Blessing on Subaru. He saw no reason to do so. However, as soon as Subaru had touched him, the Blessing had activated independently and it had reacted in a way that Reinhard could only describe as alarm.

Reinhard van Astrea was beloved by this world. The wisdom of the world was at his disposal and any question he had about the nature of an individual's power should be instantly answered. However, for the very first time, his Blessing had failed him. It had been completely unable to provide any insight about the strange power of Subaru Natsuki. It wasn't that the Blessing hadn't detected any power within him, quite the contrary: Reinhard had sensed *immense* power within the young man, easily enough to justify the young man's overwhelming confidence. However, the Blessing had failed to describe to Reinhard any way in which that power could be utilized.

Reinhard had a sudden mental image of a vast deep pool, filled to the brim with overwhelming dark magic; a pool of pure potential. The power was dormant at the moment but it was capable of evolving into virtually anything if it were ever to be triggered.

It was commonly believed that Reinhard never felt fear; that he was immune to fear or unable to comprehend it by merit of his sheer enormous power. Reinhard had often hidden his face whenever this was suggested. The speakers never understood how he felt and Reinhard had wearied of trying to explain it to them.

Others might think Reinhard invincible but he had people in his life that he truly cherished: Julius and Felix. They were his dearest friends, in some ways they were closer to him than brothers. However, they did not possess Reinhard's durability or his resiliency. Reinhard knew fear and it gnawed at him constantly. Reinhard never worried for his own life, as no true knight should. He worried for the lives of others. That one day he would be too slow, too weak, too dumb, or too cowardly to save them and their deaths would be his fault.

Reinhard watched Subaru walk away and wondered if he should chase after him and demand an explanation. Reinhard was a knight of the realm, even on his days off, and to let such a powerful being with completely unclear intentions and mysterious origins wander around the capitol unsupervised was... unwise to say the very least.

Reinhard would have gone after Subaru immediately except for his Divine Blessing of Empathy which had also triggered when Subaru touched him. This Blessing offered Reinhard insight into the minds and emotions of anyone he wished. He sensed in Subaru no bad intentions whatsoever. Subaru's mind was a bubbling cauldron of sheer happiness, excitement, and a wild desire for adventure. It was a mind almost... childish in a way. Reinhard couldn't precisely know what Subaru's desires *were* but he sensed that they were mainly a desire to accomplish and achieve and to be recognized for such achievements. They were desires such as any proud and motivated child might possess; determined to prove himself special and win acclaim.

This alone did not make Subaru harmless of course, plenty of innocent desires can be twisted into monstrous forms and yet Reinhard sensed no malice in him at all. The owner of so much restive dark power and yet he did not have any desire to inflict harm? Where had he acquired such power and how? Was it a curse? Was he possessed by it in some way? Was it a cruel joke of fate to inflict a kindly young man with a terrible power he could not hope to control?

Or could this be intended, Reinhard mused, Fate having selected the kindly young Subaru Natsuki with care; choosing him as this terrible power's rightful guardian?

Reinhard continued to debate with himself as he watched Subaru vanish into the crowd. Eventually, Reinhard turned away. He had no right to interfere with Subaru without cause. Whatever his suspicions might be he could not bring himself to condemn a young man for some speculative harm that *might* be done at some later date. Reinhard returned to his task of delivering his father's packages but, try as he might, Subaru Natsuki would not leave his mind.

Reinhard resolved that he would search for the young man later.

Subaru walked through town with a smile on his face and a song in his heart, heedless of where he was actually going. He watched everything and everyone with a smile. The wagon drivers yelling at each other, the streaming crowd of people who pushed by him, even the road workers sweeping up animal dung. He watched it all with a fond smile and a proprietary air. This was *his* world now. Subaru had never felt such overwhelming confidence in his life and he quickly grew addicted to the sensation. He'd show all of them how special he was, it was just a matter of time. He watched everything around him, trying to piece together what the next step in the main quest would be and how he could achieve it. However, Subaru felt no need to rush this. He winked at every look of disdain a passerby handed him. Each doubt, each eye roll would simply make his inevitable victory all the sweeter.

This is amazing! I'm finally going to be somebody special! All those years where everyone thought that I was a loser will finally have been worth it. This is my story. This is my adventure and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it. After everything I went through back home, I have earned an adventure. This world is my world and I absolutely deserve it.

It was right around then that Subaru had an out-of-body experience.

Everything around him froze in place and the world turned gray.

Subaru would never be able to explain quite how he felt in that moment. It was as if something had found him, something that had been looking specifically for him for longer than a human could comprehend. Or maybe it had been with him all along, constantly reaching out for him but unable to make contact. Either way Subaru felt... complete. He felt polished and finished, like a masterful work of craft, long in the making that had finally been perfected.

A moment later, searing pain came crashing down. He felt as if a colossal iron spike had been set on fire and then driven completely through his head. Subaru tried to scream but he was frozen in place and could neither move nor breathe.

In that moment, Subaru knew three phrases as if they were engraved on his heart in letters of flame: 'The Authority of Pride', 'Reason and Judgment' and 'Indomitable.'

Then, without warning, the world restarted around Subaru.

As Subaru stood there, gasping for breath, someone bumped into him from behind. "Asshole," The person spat as he walked around the trembling Subaru.

What the hell just happened? Did I level up or something? Already? I haven't even done anything yet. The Authority of Pride? What the hell is that?

Maybe the world recognized my new amazing self confidence and decided to reward me for it?

Man, leveling up hurts! Now I know where the term 'ding' comes from, because my head feels like a bell that got whacked with a hammer! What is 'Reason and Judgment'? Is that like some kind of new ability?

The moment that Subaru thought this, the world froze around him but at least this time everything didn't gray-shift. That made Subaru feel slightly more relaxed until he realized that he couldn't move either, which made him feel a whole lot less relaxed.

Subaru discovered that he could still move his eyes but that was it. He was as trapped in this frozen moment as everyone around him. A moment later, Subaru realized he couldn't breathe here.

Weird. I'm frozen in place and I can't even breathe. I should be terrified but... I'm just not.

I feel like panicking would almost be silly. I'm better than that. I don't need to panic or worry. No matter what the problem is, I can handle it. I just need to stay calm and think clearly.

Huh. These are really strange thoughts for me. I'm not usually this confident in scary situations.

Then again, Subaru, those kind of thoughts do make sense, Subaru thought to himself. This is your power. You can obviously control it. You may not know how to do it just yet but you'll figure it out. Why would you be panicking? This power bends to your desires the same way as this world one day will. You're the hero. This is your story. Just focus, bend your will to your desired outcome, and the world will follow.

Subaru decided to leave the frozen moment and everyone surged back into motion around him as if nothing had happened.

Subaru's unnatural calm and confidence persisted for a few moments longer and then slowly faded away, leaving confusion and frustration in their wake.

Wait! What the honest-to-god fuck is this?! This is my magic?! Well gee, that's a great power! 'I'm giving you this incredible magic that allows you to freeze everyone and everything around you! Oh, but it paralyzes you too! Bet this teaches you to never hit on the Game Master's girlfriend when you're playing Table-top RPGs, Subaru!'

Subaru's indignation just kept growing. *What the hell am I supposed to do with this? I know I'm only level two or something but seriously, I'm the goddamn hero of this world. Give me something useful! How am I going to accomplish anything with this magic?*

There's got to be something more to this power. Either that or I'm literally getting trolled.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* again and the world froze around him. Subaru's frustration drifted away like smoke leaving him in an analytical state of perfect calm.

On second thought, Subaru, maybe you're dismissing this power too lightly. He thought to himself. It may not allow you to act inside the frozen moment but it does allow you to think and plan. In any situation, you have all the time in the world to construct the perfect strategy. That is a remarkable power. Whether in the heat of combat or a delicate series of negotiation, every move can be precisely calculated to achieve victory. This is truly a power worthy of a great hero.

Subaru looked at a nearby 'demi-human' who had a wolf's long snout. He wore a tattered old, blue robe and his long, matted fur was visible around his throat and on his forearms.

As Subaru focused on him, his frozen eyes zoomed in on the demi-human as if putting the man under a magnifying glass. He saw the small fleas nesting in his fur. The dirty fur also contained bits of straw and tiny clumps of dirt.

Interesting. It appears, going by the materials in his fur that this fellow doesn't bathe very often. The dirt and straw is likely a suggestion that he sleeps on the street and uses straw as a bed when available. The ratty old robe suggests the man might be homeless.

Subaru glanced at a fat demi-human with a long rat-like tail who had been marching down the street with a faint sneer on his face. This man was wearing a large gem on a chain around his neck and he had numerous jeweled rings on his fingers.

He must be a prosperous merchant to show off wealth like this.

Subaru zoomed in closer.

No. There are black spots on his neck chain where the gold paint has been rubbed off. It's lead, painted to look gold. The gem appears to be fake as well. It's too clear to be a naturally occurring stone. The same goes for the rings. This is not a wealthy man, it's a man who desperately wants people to think that he's wealthy.

Subaru glanced at a beautiful, young human woman who was wearing a flowing blue dress.

It appears that her dress is high quality, compared to the average around here. There are cat hairs on her dress; cat hair in three different colors actually. Her eye shadow looks expensive. There are small rock shards in it. It was probably made from crushed stones of some sort. She's wearing a gaudy wedding ring, this one is real but it's also several sizes too large for her finger. It's tarnished too. The rest of her jewelry is highly polished but not the wedding ring. Curious. Her hands look pretty rough as well; lots of old scars and callouses. She seems wealthy but she works with her hands? Maybe a jeweler or something high end like that? Although it seems doubtful that jewel-crafting would mark her hands like this.

Subaru stared at the woman. He was beginning to get an idea.

Subaru frowned, wishing that he could scratch his chin in the frozen moment.

Alright, Subaru. Let's see if we can put all these details together, Subaru mused.

Her clothes and makeup are expensive so we know she has money. She's young, barely out of her teens so she probably inherited her money somehow. She also apparently has three cats. She's done manual labor with her hands at some point in her life but there's no new cuts or marks on her hands so she hasn't done it in a while.

What does this all add up to?

Subaru thought for a moment.

She married into money. She did manual labor of some kind, maybe as a tailor? Mom used to have some marks like that on her hands when she was working on sewing projects. Then the girl got married and now she has money. Her wedding ring is much too big for her. Maybe it was an heirloom? No, probably not. If it was precious to her then she would have had it resized. A ring that loose is just begging to be lost.

Hm. Maybe she wants it lost? She's not taking very good care of that ring. She clearly attends to her other jewelry carefully, it's all well polished. Her wedding ring is badly tarnished so she clearly doesn't value it. Why not? It's an expensive piece.

Maybe she resents her husband? If she married him for his money, it's unlikely to be a great romance and that would explain why she isn't taking very good care of it but why would she want to outright lose the ring? It's bound to fall off like this. Maybe she wants to lose it so he'll get her a new one? Maybe she's a second wife and she was given her predecessor's ring? OK so her husband is an asshole who recycled his late wife's wedding ring and the new wife probably doesn't much care for the constant reminder that she's a replacement goldfish.

Reason and Judgment gave Subaru no indication of how correct or incorrect his deductions were but Subaru felt like his story was probably pretty close to the truth even if not exactly accurate.

This power is only marginally suited to combat, although infinite time to plan your attacks should not be underrated. Still, in any situation where it becomes necessary to persuade or negotiate, this power will be invaluable, Subaru thought.

Whatever your quest is, fighting will be unavoidable, but just as important is the mastery of soft power: the ability to negotiate and persuade. That allows you to form alliances and build armies. Negotiation is likely preferable to combat in most instances anyway. It would be most unfortunate for anyone to have to die, particularly you.

Satisfied, Subaru willed the world to resume its movement around him.

The crowd immediately flowed back into motion and the well-dressed, young woman drew back from Subaru, looking at him with frightened eyes.

As she hurried away, looking nervously over her shoulder, Subaru realized that he had still been staring at her with rapt interest when the world started moving again.

Subaru felt *Reason and Judgment's* unnatural calm and confidence start to fade away.

"Hey! Quit blocking traffic!" A fat man snapped at Subaru, grumbling at being forced to step around him.

Subaru stepped into a nearby alley to think more about his newfound ability. He was certain this was the key to the next step in his quest. He just had to figure out how to use it properly.

Subaru walked into the dark alley, deep in thought.

Alright, so I've obviously been called here to do something but I don't know what. I guess that I'm on the right track since I just got my first magic 'spell.' But what do I do with it? And where do I go next? Video games usually have bread crumbs to avoid this problem. I know nothing about this world so where do I go? What do I do? Do I just walk out of town and look for monsters to fight? Maybe I would find a frightened maiden to rescue who would tell me about a marauding dragon or something? Or do I head for the local castle and try to be sucked into some kind of political intrigue over the fate of the kingdom?

Stories are not told like this! Whether it's a game or a novel, the main character is always given some kind of associate who can provide direction and exposition to the audience. Unfortunately, I don't know anyone here. Well, I did meet Reinhard.

Hm. Maybe I shouldn't have let him go off so easily. Maybe helping him deliver that mail was a sidequest? No, he never even implied he wanted help. On the other hand, he did invite me over to his house tonight and I could ask him some questions then... if I had any idea where the hell he lived.

Great work, Subaru. You're making a mess of things in your new world already. This is why everyone thinks that you're a loser.

Subaru was concentrating so hard on his problems that he almost bumped into three young men coming the other way down the alley.

"Hey, what have we got here?" One of the young men, a pale, lanky kid with long, dirty hair, said with a smirk.

Subaru saw the wolf-smiles on their faces and suddenly remembered his school days.

These guys are bad news, Subaru thought. *I met a lot of kids like them back when I was still going to school. They're young, dumb, and aggressive. They're as likely to hurt someone as part of a joke gone too far as they are to do it intentionally. Sometimes that can be even more dangerous.*

Subaru used *Reason and Judgment* to pause the scene. His apprehension vanished replaced by disdain.

Characters like these are where the term 'trash mob' comes from. This is a complete waste of valuable time. Unfortunately, the problem still needs to be dealt with.

Well, Subaru, this doesn't look promising, Subaru thought to himself. *These three are unshaven and they wear raggedy clothes. They look like they've been living rough. Those bulges under their clothes look specifically like daggers. That's not good. Reinhard openly wore a sword but these guys want to conceal that the fact that they're armed. They use small weapons, easily concealed and easy to use in tight quarters.*

Subaru felt a tinge of fear that broke through *Reason and Judgment's* confidence as he remembered his encounters with thugs and violent bullies back home.

These guys are ambush predators and they think that I'm easy prey. Which probably isn't too far from the truth.

A moment later, Subaru's unnatural calm reasserted itself and he again viewed the situation as if from a comfortable, remote distance. He felt almost like a different person as he strategized.

Reason and Judgment isn't a combat skill, Subaru mused. *It could be an advantage in a fight, certainly but trying to fight three armed men using Reason and Judgment would be an act of desperation. You do have one other power: Indomitable. That might be a combat power. But this would be a poor time to try and figure out what it does unless you're cornered. Reason and Judgment's strongest power is to persuade and manipulate by observation so ideally you would use it here to negotiate a ceasefire.*

Subaru inspected the men for a long time but he didn't notice anything that would suggest that they were anything other than what they initially appeared to be: common muggers. He did notice that the shortest one was carrying a heavy bag which Subaru suspected to be full of money. The bag had tiny bloodstains on it. Worse yet, the blood appeared to be fresh. It seemed that he wasn't their first meal of the day and that those weapons weren't just for intimidation.

Wait. If they already took a score today, why are they starting trouble with you? You don't look like you're wealthy. In fact, to these people your clothes probably make you look like you just rolled out of bed. These three seem unusually excited too. Perhaps they just took a big score? For whatever reason, they're not thinking clearly. They're drunk on power and excitement and that means they'll be really hard to talk down. Still it's the best strategy you have so you might as well try.

Subaru restarted time with a sigh. "Hey guys! I'm Subaru Natsuki!" He said, forcing an amused smile across his face. He tried to hold onto *Reason and Judgment's* supreme confidence. "What brings you here? Looking for a dance partner?" He drawled.

The men blinked and their smiles faltered as they glanced at each other in confusion. Subaru's refusal to 'read the room' and be intimidated by three men, one of whom was significantly larger than him, was throwing them off step.

That's it. Recognize that I'm not afraid of you and that my lack of fear should make you apprehensive. Never underestimate the power of a good bluff.

Subaru had been in a surprising number of fights growing up. One thing that he had learned early on was that sometimes *acting* like you can defend yourself was just as good as actually being able to do it. It makes people wonder if that 'easy target' might not be as easy as it seemed and if they might get hurt in the altercation as well. The longer they deliberate over this the better. The more someone debates if starting a fight over nothing is really worth it, the more likely they are to conclude that it's not.

The three seemed uncertain for a moment but then their faces hardened and they began grumbling to one another.

Uh-oh. I may have misplayed this. I don't need Reason and Judgment to analyze this. These three are insecure, feel disrespected, and have probably been pushed around by bigger fish most of their lives. They compensate for all this by hunting down easy prey. Today they took a big payday, maybe their very first big payday and they feel like big men now. I've made them second guess themselves and that is unforgivable to them. If they don't make me sorry for this, their self-doubt will come back and they'll do anything to avoid that.

Hey guys, maybe we could talk about this over a beer? Believe me, nobody knows more about self-doubt than me! You seriously don't need to beat me black and blue here.

The lanky one whipped out a long knife and pointed it at Subaru. "This is a private way, buddy! There's a toll for passing," He said with a thin smile.

"Sorry, I don't have any money," Subaru answered, trying to sound amused.

"Oh? I'm sure if you were properly motivated you could make a *little* contribution to our good cheer," The knife wielder said.

Subaru snorted. "Yeah. I'm dressed like this because I'm just *rolling* in disposable income," He said.

The three glanced at each other dubiously. It seemed for a moment like they might believe that he really didn't have any money. However, the three began muttering angrily to one another.

I know this dance. These jerks feel like that by being broke, I've cheated them out of whatever treat they planned to buy for themselves with my money. It's not the most logical train of thought but it's a common enough worldview for bullies. I'm not going to talk these guys down. That leave me only one choice: go all in on the bluff.

"As opposed to you," Subaru snickered to the knife-wielding thug, "Whom I assume dresses that way because he got dressed in the dark."

The knife wielder gaped at him while his two friends started giggling.

The man with the knife turned and slapped his fellows, "Shut up, both of you!"

Subaru had to go for sheer intimidation: Act like they were no threat to him at all and that the potential risk of attacking him was extreme. If that failed, he'd have to try to fight his way out and that did not look promising for Subaru.

Never underestimate the power of a good bluff, Subaru thought. Unfortunately, I don't have high hopes for scaring them off. Running might be an option, assuming anyone on the street would even get involved and not simply stand back and watch them gut me. I can certainly outrun the little one but outrunning that giant and the knife wielding asshole would be tricky.

I don't have any weapons so I'm not ready for a fight. Unless someone appears to rescue me like a cheap plot-device, I do not love my chances.

"You need to learn to watch your tongue!" The knife wielder said, pulling out a second knife. "Maybe I can help you by cutting a few inches of it off!"

The big thug behind 'dual knives' pulled out brass knuckles and the little one carrying the money bag took out a crude nail festooned club.

Subaru felt his hands trembling and he triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

He felt his terror dissipate like smoke. He might as well have been watching a character on TV for all the situation affected him.

Well, Subaru, it appears your options are somewhat limited, He thought to himself. If they call your bluff, running is probably your best option. We'll just promise ourselves a reckoning for this liberty later... You could try to activate Indomitable but you have no idea what it does. That not only means that it might not help your chances in the fight but it could just as easily hurt them. If it turns out that Indomitable gives you a ten percent damage reduction but it also roots you in place, it will only serve to make you die ten percent more slowly while 'Dual Knives' carves you up. So let's not trigger that power until we're trapped and desperate.

Meanwhile, never underestimate the power of a good bluff. You don't need to take away their ability to attack, just their will to do so.

Subaru restarted time.

Subaru felt his calm and confidence draining away as he reached inside his pockets looking for anything he could use as a weapon.

He found his flip phone, his key-ring, and a few coins.

Well, it's better than nothing! Subaru pulled out his flip phone, snapped it open, and pointed it at the thugs like the world's strangest knife. The screen lit up as he pressed a button.

"The fuck is that?" Dual Knives asked, staring at the brightly lit screen.

Subaru gave him a cocky smile. "Oh? You never seen one of these before? Well, it's got a bunch of neat tricks. It's going to cost you a few pints of blood to see them though."

"Wait, is that some sort of magic weapon?" The little thug asked, falling back a step.

"Oh, you must be the smart one," Subaru said mockingly. "It's a pretty impressive little toy. Step a little closer and I'll show you," He said, pressing the button and causing the screen to light up again.

The little mugger nervously stepped closer to the big one who was rubbing his chin with a worried frown on his face.

Alright, the Tiny and Jumbo want out of this situation. Good thinking. There's nothing to be gained here and a ton to lose.

Dual knives flashed his teeth at Subaru. "You fucking think that I'm afraid of you?!" He shrieked, raising his knives. "I ain't afraid of no magic!"

"Then you're foolish," Subaru replied quietly.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*, pausing the world and giving himself time to think.

Hm. It looks like the big one and the small are ready to sit this fight out, Subaru noticed, That would be great news if Dual Knives wasn't so clearly capable of killing you all by himself.

Dual Knives's stance is badly off balance. At a guess, it looks like his strategy is just to throw himself at the target and then keep slashing until it dies.

He'll be open to counterattacks when he makes that reckless lunge, unfortunately without a weapon there's no way for you to take advantage of that. It's unlikely that trying to bonk him on the head with a flip phone will be all that effective.

Subaru rejected one idea after another while staring at Dual Knives's frozen, snarling face.

Alright, seems you have really one option at this point: Once you unpause the world, switch your phone to camera mode, blind Dual Knives with the flash and then run like hell while they try to figure out what kind of spell you just cast on them.

Subaru couldn't feel terror in the frozen moment, but he could certainly feel frustration.

Why is this situation even happening? Doesn't Dual Knives know that I'm supposed to be the hero here?

Subaru unfroze the moment and quickly switched his phone to camera mode. Dual Knives gave him a slasher smile when suddenly his attention was drawn over Subaru's shoulder. Subaru heard rapid footsteps racing up behind him.

Subaru's face broke into a wolf grin.

The cavalry is here! I'm getting rescued from this 'no win' scenario!

Subaru tried to glance behind him without taking his eyes off Dual Knives. He frowned. The new character running toward him was a teenage girl with blond hair and blood-red eyes. She wore pants with one leg ripped off and a halter top. A red scarf nearly as long as she was tall, streamed behind her as she ran. She was tiny and probably weighed

about ninety pounds soaking wet.

This is my backup?!

Unless she's some kind of anime magical girl who can suplex a tank without breaking a sweat, I don't think she'll be much help.

Well, any help is better than none, I guess, Subaru mused. *I'll wait for her to attack and then I'll blind Dual Knives with the flash so that he's disoriented and we can take him down together. The other two should run away at that point.*

The girl raced down the alley with a fierce grin on her face.

She reached Subaru.

She moved past Subaru.

Then she bolted to the far end of the alley, leaped up the wall using some protruding bricks as stepping stones, swung over the side and was gone.

For a long moment, the four men in the alley simply stared at the wall where the girl had disappeared. Subaru was probably the one most flabbergasted. He felt like a performer whose costar had forgotten her lines and simply dashed off, abandoning him on the empty stage.

Subaru was getting the uncomfortable sensation that his plot armor in this particular scene had malfunctioned.

Dual Knives snarled and lunged at him but Subaru snapped a picture right in Dual Knives's face causing Dual Knives to stagger backwards, rubbing his eyes and wiping his face.

"The fuck did you just do to me?!" He demanded, sounding a bit scared.

"What?" Subaru asked jovially. "I thought you guys wanted to see a sample of my magic. Don't worry, it won't trigger until later."

Dual Knives took a step backwards, his face pale.

Holy shit, he's buying this!

"Stop right there!" A clear voice demanded from behind Subaru.

Subaru turned around and his mind went completely blank. Standing at the alley mouth, Subaru saw the most beautiful girl he had ever imagined. She had shimmering silver hair and brilliant amethyst eyes. She wore a white skirt and spotless white clothes that had purple accents. She stood in the alleyway entrance, tall and proud, pointing at the muggers accusingly.

"Return what you have stolen from me!" She said in a clear authoritative voice.

Subaru blinked and then he looked back at Dual Knives. For a brief moment, the two enemies were united in their shared confusion.

"You stole from *her*?" Subaru asked.

"No, I didn't!" Dual Knives objected.

"I'm willing to look the other way about your theft but I need the insignia you stole from me returned right now," She stated, holding out her hand.

"You know, dude, if I were you, I'd just give it back to her," Subaru said conversationally.

Dual Knives looked at him incredulously.

Subaru shrugged. "Hey, I'm just saying. I got you pretty good with my 'Sony wand.' If I don't take off that curse, you're going to be really hurting by nightfall. But don't worry, you'll be beyond all worldly concerns by morning."

Dual Knives cringed backwards, his knives trembling. Dual Knives was frantically inspecting his body, looking for some sign of damage. The other two men backed away, clearly ready to run for their lives.

"Give her back her insignia and I'll remove the curse," Subaru said pleasantly.

"I didn't take her fucking insignia! I've never seen her before in my life! Take the fucking curse off me!" He almost screamed.

Subaru frowned. "Are you sure this is the man who stole your insignia?" He asked the girl. Subaru was actually surprised that he could speak so calmly to what had to be the most beautiful woman in creation. He would have assumed that his mind would have gone completely blank and he'd be unable to string two words together. Maybe it had something to do with the calm from *Reason and Judgment*?

"No, my insignia was stolen by a small girl with blond hair," She replied.

Subaru frowned at the silver haired girl. "So... why did you even accuse them of taking it in the first place?"

The girl blinked at Subaru and flushed. "Well, I saw her run in here..."

"Yeah, she climbed that wall and disappeared," Subaru explained, pointing at the wall.

"Oh no," She whispered, covering her mouth with an expression of dismay.

"Alright! See? I didn't take her fucking thing! So take this freaking curse off me!" Dual Knives demanded.

Subaru raised his phone and snapped another picture.

Dual Knives recoiled from the flash. "What the fuck did you just do?!" He demanded.

"I have *suspended* the curse on all three of you but I have not canceled it," Subaru warned. "Behold! I have captured a fragment of your very being!" Subaru held up the phone and showed Dual Knives the picture.

Lucky me, this picture has Dual Knives recoiling with his eyes bugging out of his face.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Dual Knives demanded, his face pale.

"You have all been afflicted with the 'Creeping Rot' Curse!" Subaru proclaimed. "Each time you shed innocent blood, the curse's grip on you shall grow stronger. When the curse's power is finally unleashed, your flesh shall drip from your bones like wax until you fall over dead! Now go! And pray that you never see my face again!" Subaru roared.

The three thugs ran down the alley, bleating piteously.

Subaru started to laugh. He struggled to hold it in until the thugs were out of ear shot but he couldn't help it. He laughed uproariously.

"Did you really place a curse on them?" The girl whispered, pressing her hand to her mouth.

A voice from beside Subaru said: "Nope."

Subaru glanced to his right and saw a small gray cat. A completely ordinary cat except for the fact that it was talking. Oh, and it was floating in mid air. "I'm sorry to break this to you, guy, but there's no curse on any of them," The cat shrugged.

"Oh, I know that. I don't know how to inflict a curse. They sure seemed to believe it though, didn't they?" Subaru told the cat.

The cat laughed.

"You told them that they were cursed when they weren't?!" The girl said, folding her arms across her chest. "Why? You scared those poor men out of their minds!"

"Because it got them to go away and we didn't have to fight them which potentially could have meant killing them," Subaru answered. "Besides, maybe they'll rethink their lives if they think that hurting innocent people could hurt them too."

Subaru couldn't help but stare at the girl with a foolish grin. She was like some rare, flawless jewel. He noticed that her ears came to delicate points.

An elf girl? This is so awesome! Subaru almost squealed. This is it. This is the female lead. The main love interest in my story. The beautiful virtuous princess who falls in love with me. The person who's always there to congratulate and comfort me. This is so amazing. What does her hair feel like? What does her skin feel like? Heck, I've never even kissed a girl! I wonder how long until she lets me kiss her. Hell, I wonder how long I have to wait until I earn the right to sleep with her! Do I need to defeat some enemies before the plot opens up that option or can I just engage in conversation with her to get her affection levels up? I guess I'd probably have to do both before she takes me to bed. Oh my god, she's perfect! She's gorgeous, she's exotic, and most importantly, she's all mine.

Everything went dark.

When Subaru regained consciousness, he was staring at a pair of white boots.

"Are you alright?" The elf girl asked, crouching over him.

Subaru coughed and pushed himself off the ground, regaining his feet. "Yeah, I think so. How long was I out?"

"Just a minute or two," The elf said, frowning at Subaru. "Does this have anything to do with that strange talisman you're carrying? Are you actually cursed?"

"No, not unless you cursed me while I was napping," Subaru replied, rubbing his face. His head hurt. "What happened?"

"It was probably just some bad energy floating around inside you," The floating cat said, glowering down at Subaru. "Maybe you were having *wicked thoughts* about someone. That can have terrible consequences on your body, you know. You need to watch that. Who knows? Next time it happens the effects could be much, much more severe."

Subaru heard the threat in the cat's voice and swallowed hard.

Wait, so the cat can read my mind and then it knocked me unconscious when it didn't like what it saw in there? Is that really what happened?

"Since you claim to know so much about curses, I thought about giving you one but my daughter talked me out of it," The cat continued.

"*Your daughter?*" Subaru's gaze flickered between the cat and the elf girl. He really didn't see the family resemblance. The cat was glaring at him.

Subaru coughed.

OK, so I feel pretty sure that the cat knows exactly what I was thinking about his 'daughter' before I collapsed. I also have a hunch that the cat's talk about cursing me is not just bluster. I think I better go out of my way to avoid pissing the cat off again.

"Please tell me," The elf said. "Do you know where the person who took my insignia went?"

"If you mean the blond girl, she ran down this alley and jumped over the wall," Subaru pointed.

"Oh no," The elf said in distress. "Do you know who she is? Where I can find her?"

"I'm sorry, I don't," Subaru explained. "I'm a stranger in these parts. You're one of the first people I've met here."

The elf threw her arms down at her sides in a peculiarly childlike gesture of frustration.

Subaru watched her eyes getting watery and suddenly realized that he'd do anything to keep her from crying.

"But I bet that I can help you find her!" Subaru announced.

"How?" The cat asked coldly. "You just said you don't know who she is or anyone in the city so how are you going to help us find a thief?"

"Well, I'm really really really smart," Subaru answered him with a grin, trying to show off for the elf girl.

The cat met Subaru's smile with a glower.

Oops. Being flippant will probably do nothing to endear me to the magic cat.

The elf girl looked at Subaru in confusion. "That doesn't really-"

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and the world froze around him. He scanned the alley and especially the wall that the blond girl had climbed up but no useful details presented themselves. He quickly scanned the elfen girl and the magical cat.

Interesting. These two are almost impossibly clean and groomed. That doesn't leave me very much to observe about them. Do they use magic to accomplish that?

Subaru shook off the idle speculation.

That doesn't matter right now. It's time to help this girl find her missing insignia. Not only is this almost certainly part of the main quest but there's no way I'm going to allow this living angel to walk away from me. The timing of this meeting is actually perfect. I get to show off my talents to a beautiful girl and she has found the ideal person to solve her problem for her. By chance or fate everything is fitting together perfectly. Unfortunately, this alley gives me very few clues to work with.

Damn it, Subaru thought. Too bad you didn't think to scan the girl when you saw her.

No sooner had Subaru thought this then the girl reappeared in front of his eyes, close enough for him to touch, as did the three thugs, all standing frozen in place. Subaru realized that he had been moved back to the part of the alley he'd been standing in during the confrontation with Dual Knives.

Hm. This is a memory, isn't it? Reason and Judgment must allow you to review things that you've already seen.

Subaru found this pretty exciting. It even began to break through *Reason and Judgment's* unnatural calm.

Huh. So this ability not only allows me to see details but also to record and playback prior events? That's pretty cool! It even lets me freeze people in poses as long as I saw them in that position once before! So if I happened to walk in on a pretty girl while she was changing...

OK hold up, Subaru, you have bigger problems to solve right now. Besides, thinking about naked girls, especially naked elf girls, is likely to make the talking cat fry you.

Can I still scan people if they're just memories? Subaru wondered. He focused on the blond girl. His gaze instantly zoomed in and he saw all the little details that he never would have noticed before.

You know, Subaru, you might be onto something here. He thought to himself. The teachers always told you that you were stupid. Maybe you weren't dumb, just bored. What if you simply never had a worthy challenge to focus your talents on so we just stumbled along without trying? Maybe you were always secretly brilliant and in this world your

talents are finally beginning to flower.

That must be exactly it. Everyone called you a NEET and a loser because you always stayed in our room but the truth was there simply wasn't anything worth going out of your room for. You didn't fail in your old world, the old world failed you!

But you're here now and you can show everyone what you're really capable of. Earth missed out on your greatness and it's not going to get a second bite. This is your world and you're going to claim it for your own! Of course to accomplish such lofty ambitions, you do need a suitable partner... You don't really think that it's a coincidence that you met this beautiful elf maiden just minutes after you arrived do you? Or that a perfect opportunity to impress her and put her in your debt just fell into your lap?

The details of the thief's life easily fell into place.

Subaru restarted the world.

He still felt *Reason and Judgment's* staggering confidence outside of the frozen moment. It seemed to be lingering a little longer this time.

This is going to be fun. After all, I'm helping a pretty girl find her treasure so I deserve to show off a little, right? Remember watching that funny show about Sherlock Holmes with Mom and Dad? It gives me an idea.

"-answer his question," The elf finished, looking at Subaru skeptically.

"Well, I know that the girl is an experienced thief but not a very successful one. She's been poor her whole life. She grew up in the city, this city I assume but there's no evidence to show that for certain. She's currently between homes and she hasn't been eating well lately. Put all of this together and I'm pretty sure we'll find her in the town slums," Subaru explained, taking a flamboyant bow and looking up at the girl with a grin.

The elf stared at him with wide eyes.

"And just how do you know all this if you say you've never met that thief before?" The cat asked suspiciously.

"I didn't know, I saw," Subaru replied.

Damn, I always wanted to say that!

The floating cat gave a low growl.

Oh, right. Important safety tip, Subaru: stop provoking the magical flying cat.

"What does that mean?" The elf asked quietly while the cat glowered at Subaru.

"Did you notice her shoes and her knife?" Subaru asked.

"What about them?" The cat grumbled.

"Her knife was short and small. It's not a fighting weapon. It's a tool of last resort. Plus she probably weighs a hundred pounds tops. She's not going to fight someone hand to hand for her loot; for her it's a grab and dash. But look at her shoes. They were old, worn out, and have several holes in them. Her entire life depends on her speed, a small cut or stubbing her toe on a rock could be the difference between getting away with the loot or getting caught and hung. Those shoes are her greatest asset in an escape yet she hasn't replaced the damaged shoes with something more reliable. That's the state of her finances right there," Subaru explained.

The elf blinked and shared a wide-eyed look with the cat. The cat shook his head with a groan but the elf girl turned back to Subaru, looking impressed.

"What else?" The elf girl asked.

"We know that she grew up in the city because of her fingernails," Subaru continued, fighting the urge to giggle. "They're slightly discolored and yellow. That's normally a sign of malnutrition as a child. Could be a fungal infection," He admitted, "But I also noticed that her ribs are visible under her skin which suggests she isn't eating very often and her small size suggests that her growth was probably stunted. So if it's malnutrition, where would you encounter that? If she was living on a farm she'd have fresh vegetables regularly, even if they were poor and she went hungry regularly she'd still have a varied diet with essential nutrients. They'd also be able to go into the woods to find food to supplement their diet. She clearly didn't have that so she grew up in the city. So she's in the city but she's poor and she doesn't have a steady roof over her head so that says we should check the slums," Subaru finished with a grin.

Subaru felt dizzy for a moment and *Reason and Judgment's* confidence finally slipped away.

Damn. I wish that confidence would stick around longer. Maybe I should trigger it again?

The girl and the cat exchanged a guarded look. "He's not lying," The cat admitted. "At least he *thinks* that he's telling the truth. And he doesn't have any... *evil* intentions toward you." The cat said in almost a growl.

Subaru looked away in embarrassment. Apparently it was a very tricky thing to try to pick up an empath's daughter.

"If we go down to the slums and look around, we might learn more," Subaru added.

The girl gave him a puzzled look. "...Why are trying to help me?" She murmured. "I'm a silver haired half-elf."

Because I'd do anything to spend a few hours with you! Oh shit. The cat looks like he not only knows what I'm thinking but like he's about to shoot lightning at me.

Subaru paused. "I'm new around here," He admitted. "I don't know where I am or what I'm doing here or even anything about this place. But I think, I hope, that I'm here to do some good. And helping you is the first good thing I've had the opportunity to do so far," Subaru gave the girl a weary smile. He took a step toward her and extended his hand. "My name is Subaru Natsuki."

The girl stared at his hand as if she had never seen one before. Subaru wasn't sure why this seemed so significant to her but doubt, mistrust, and hope were all flickering across her face.

"This is Puck," The girl explained slowly, taking Subaru's hand. "And my name is... Satella," She finished.

"That's a pretty name," Subaru replied.

Satella's eyes widened.

"Alright, shall we head for the slums then?" Subaru asked, beginning to walk out of the alley.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Puck shaking his head at Satella. "Why?" The small cat asked.

As Subaru exited the alley, closely followed by Satella and Puck, he noticed a small bag lying on the ground. He knelt down and picked it up to discover it was the same bag of money that the little thug had been carrying.

Huh. They must have dropped it while they were escaping. So this is what it feels like in real life when loot drops after a battle.

"Subaru, what are you doing?" Satella asked.

"Looks like our former playmates dropped this during their escape," Subaru replied, opening the bag. It had over thirty gold coins in it.

Damn that's a lot of gold! Wait... is it?

Fuck, I have absolutely no idea what a gold coin is worth around here. This bag could be enough to buy a loaf of bread or it could be the down payment on a castle. The muggers were clearly poor but they obviously stole this gold going by the blood stains so who knows how much it's worth?

"Subaru, are you stealing?" Satella asked, looking at him through narrowed eyes.

"No, I am not," Subaru responded calmly. "Those guys tried to attack me for no reason. They dropped this while they were running away. I picked it up and now it's mine. Very different."

"That seems like a very slight distinction to me," Satella said, folding her arms across her chest in disapproval.

"It's actually a pretty broad distinction, Tella," Subaru replied.

She blinked. "What did you call me?"

"Tella? I like giving people nicknames. Do you mind? Sorry, Satella is a pretty name but it's also kind of a mouthful," Subaru answered.

Satella glanced away and pulled some silver hair across her face like a veil. "Tella is fine," She murmured almost inaudibly.

"OK," Subaru frowned.

Why does Satella look so uncomfortable?

"So are we going to the slums or not?" Puck interjected, moving in between them.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Subaru said as they exited the alley and walked onto a broad street. They stood on a tall hill, overlooking the greater part of the city. "Do you guys know where the slums are?"

Puck frowned at him. "No. I thought you knew!"

Subaru made a face at the cat. "No, but I bet I can guess," Subaru looked out over the city and briefly stepped in and out of *Reason and Judgment's* frozen moment. "I'm betting the slums are that way," Subaru said, pointing down the hill toward the river.

"Are you basing that on anything or did you just pick a direction at random?" Puck grumbled, floating beside Subaru as he started down the hill. Satella silently walked behind them.

"Rich people like to live on top of hills. The air is fresher, the view is better, and best of all they get to literally look down on everyone else," Subaru explained, glancing back at Satella who followed along with her head down. "The other factor, of course, is water. Tella, I'm guessing that you don't have sewage systems or indoor plumbing around here?"

Satella lifted her head and blinked at Subaru. "Um, I'm sorry but I don't know what either of those words mean," She replied.

"No worries, although I'm sure I'm really going to start missing both of those before much longer," Subaru admitted. "Anyway, people need water. They need water to cook, to clean, to bathe. Houses need water so people prefer to live near some clean body of water and most folks would probably be happier if said water flowed *through* the kitchen. Rich people don't care how close they are to their water source because they have servants. How difficult it is to get water into the house doesn't effect rich people since they pay other people to carry it. That's why they can live on hill tops. Poor people on the other hand need to carry water themselves so its very important that a water source be nearby. Wells are cleaner so the houses that are located near a well in a city are going to tend to be more expensive. Rivers are the natural dumping grounds for run off, sewage, and all manner of other nasty stuff. That means that the poorest people live close to the river because that's their only water source."

I sure hope I'm right. Otherwise this will turn out to be really embarrassing.

"For the record, rich people use water enchantments to create and move water through their houses but what you said seems like a reasonable guess anyway," Puck admitted grudgingly.

Close to the river the group entered a part of the city that looked as though it had been through an earthquake. Houses and buildings lay in aggressive disrepair. No building looked completely intact and most had huge holes in them. A few people sat leaning against walls with their heads down, saying nothing and showing no sign of moving. Subaru noticed that everyone was watching him and Satella closely and the attention was not welcoming.

A lone merchant sat at a table by the road with a few baskets of food for sale.

"OK, so we found the slums," Puck muttered from his perch on Tella's shoulder. "Now what, Subaru? Any more bright ideas?"

Subaru sighed. "Well it wouldn't kill you to come up with a few either, Puck!"

"We need to find the insignia," Satella interrupted before Puck could respond. "Where do we start looking?"

Subaru rubbed his forehead. "Tella, what exactly does this insignia look like?"

"It's about this big," Satella said, moving her hands about an inch apart. "It's silver with a red jewel in the middle and the kingdom's symbol emblazoned on it."

"So it's basically jewelry then?" Subaru asked.

Satella nodded.

Subaru scratched his chin. "Well," He murmured. "We know that our blond thief is hard up for cash since she's not eating regularly. She's either impoverished or an addict or both. It's not very likely she'd want to keep a piece of jewelry. Especially down here because that's just begging for somebody bigger and meaner to take it away from you. So... she'd try to sell it."

"*Sell* it?!" Satella gasped.

"Yeah but I think that might be good for us," Subaru mused.

"How could that possibly be good for us?" She demanded.

"Well, finding one little blond thief in all this mess is going to be pretty challenging. Finding a place where you can buy stolen merchandise has got to be easier," Subaru said. "They need their customers to be able to find them after all."

"I could try asking the spirits," Satella suggested.

"You can do that?" Subaru asked.

I don't even know what that means. I'd prefer not to admit to that, however.

She nodded. "I'm a spirit arts user," She explained. "I can try asking the lesser spirits if they've seen my insignia or the girl."

"OK, sounds like it's worth a try," Subaru said.

Satella looked at Puck. "Puck, why don't you go and sit with Subaru while I speak to the spirits?"

Puck's reaction was one that Subaru was glad he didn't miss, even if it was at his expense: Puck's jaw dropped and he looked simply aghast as if Satella had suggested that he roll around in raw sewage.

"Lia, why don't I just stay here and keep an eye on you while you talk to them?" Puck hedged.

"Puck, you know that the spirits are scared of you. They won't come if you're this close. Go and sit with Subaru for a while. I'll be fine," Satella responded.

Puck looked mutinous but he obeyed. He drifted away from Satella and perched on a nearby stone pillar near the side of the square, deliberately turning his back to Subaru and watching Satella.

I guess I don't blame him. Given the choice between the two of us, I'd rather look at Satella too.

Subaru reached into the purse he found and pulled out his coins counting them again.

Thirty eight coins. I still have no idea what that's worth. I'll probably need to bribe someone down here to find out where people fence stolen property. There's no point in trying to bribe anyone to tell me where the girl is. These people don't trust outsiders. Word would get to the girl that someone is looking for her long before I found her and she'd just hide.

Well, one problem at a time. I have money so I can at least try to buy information.

Subaru looked at Satella. She was standing in the middle of the square with a prayer-like demeanor while dozens of tiny balls of white light appeared and drifted around her.

Well, that sure looks cool. I mean I have no idea at all what it's supposed to be doing but it definitely looks cool!

Puck was still seated on the post a short distance away from Satella, his back to Subaru.

"Puck?" Subaru called. "I'm going to go and talk to that peddler we saw around the corner. Maybe he knows something. I'll be right back."

Puck gave no indication that he had heard Subaru, that he was listening, or that he had any intention of repeating Subaru's message for Satella if she came out of her trance.

Subaru sighed and walked away.

I wonder if Puck would actually try to coax Satella away before I get back. I mean, hopefully Satella wouldn't believe that I simply got bored and wandered off but you never know. I should make this quick.

Subaru walked around the corner and headed over to the peddler's shop. This tradesman's place of business looked much like a child's lemonade stand. It was a small wooden table with food and general goods lying in baskets on the ground behind it. The trader was a tubby man with a short white goatee.

"Hello, sir. What's your pleasure today?" The trader asked.

Subaru scratched his chin. "Maybe you can point me in the right direction?" Subaru asked quietly.

"Maybe. What are you looking for?"

"My boss told me to acquire some jewelry for him," Subaru lied.

"You're not going to find any jewelry stores down here," The merchant laughed. "You're better off looking in Hightown. There's a big-"

"No, no," Subaru interrupted. "The boss wanted me to *acquire* it. From a person reluctant to sell."

"Oh, I see," The trader nodded calmly.

"Yeah but apparently someone else beat me to it. A sneak thief from down here," Subaru glanced around to ensure that they weren't being overheard. "If I go back to the boss empty handed, my good health won't be worth much. But maybe I can still buy it for him if, for example, I knew where someone might go to sell it," Subaru said meaningfully.

The trade looked thoughtful. "I'm sorry that you're in such a tight spot, buddy. I'd like to help you. But giving you that kind of information means putting myself at considerable risk and I don't know you all that well."

Subaru took out a single gold piece and let it fall on the table.

The merchant quickly pocketed it. "Go down that way until you find a large building. It's a run down old tavern. Old Rom runs it. He's easy to pick out of a crowd, he's a giant. Tell him what you're looking for and that you've got money. He'll do you right. But take my advice and don't try to con him."

"Thanks," Subaru nodded and walked away.

"-But where did he go?" Subaru heard Satella ask from around the corner.

"I'm not sure, Lia. Maybe he wandered off somewhere," Puck replied with a yawn.

How the heck do you get 'Lia' out of 'Satella'?

"Subaru!" Satella called as Subaru turned the corner.

"Hey, Tella. I was just talking to the local merchant, asking some questions," Subaru grumbled, looking at the cat. He stared at the tiny floating cat with something close to active dislike.

For God's sake, Puck. It would have cost you nothing to repeat my message to your daughter. I'm trying to help Tella and what have you contributed all day? I'm not sure if you were just so indifferent to my presence that you failed to notice I was talking to you or if you're actually so spiteful that you're willing to sabotage Tella's attempts to get her insignia back just to get her away from me.

Puck's face reflected no disappointment that Subaru had returned but neither did he seemed pleased by it.

"So did the spirits tell you anything useful?" Subaru asked.

Satella shook her head. "Not really. They recognize the girl. She comes around here a lot but they don't know where she lives or where she is. I thought maybe if we waited here for a while we might bump into her."

"I'm not sure that's got good odds of working and time isn't something we have in abundance anyway," Subaru said dubiously. "The merchant I spoke to says there's some kind of fence over that way. This girl is going to want to unload the loot as soon as possible. So I think we have good odds of finding her there or at least the merchandise."

"A... fence?" Satella asked.

"Yeah. You know, a person who buys property and doesn't ask where you got it. A crook, basically." Subaru explained.

"That sounds concerning. Should we go find a city guard?" Satella asked.

Subaru shook his head and started walking in the direction the merchant had indicated. "Nah, that'll just spoke `em. If we bring in guards, they might just arrest the fence and if we close down the fence and the thief hasn't brought the insignia there yet, she'll go to ground and we'll never find her."

Satella followed after Subaru, hanging her head. "I can't believe that I already lost my insignia," She whispered.

"Already? How long have you had this thing?" Subaru asked.

"I got it this morning," Satella replied.

Subaru stopped and turned to look at her. "You got it just this morning, and it's already been stolen?" He asked slowly.

Satella nodded her face red. "I know, I can't believe how easily I lost it. I-"

"Were you wearing it or was it in a pocket or something when it got stolen?" Subaru interrupted.

Satella blinked. "My sponsor gave me a purse to keep it in."

"So the thief stole the purse?"

"Yes, but then she dropped it," Satella replied.

"What do you mean 'she dropped it?'" Subaru asked with narrowed eyes.

"I chased the girl and she took out the insignia and dropped the purse," Satella explained.

"Do you still have the purse?"

Satella nodded and pulled a small, purple purse out of her pocket. She offered it to Subaru.

Subaru shook his head. "Just shake it for me, please," Subaru said with a smile.

I don't know if this has anything to do with Reason and Judgment but I'm starting to notice connections that I never would have seen back home.

Satella looked mystified but she obediently shook the purse. A faint clink was heard inside of it.

"You have money in there?" Subaru asked his smile becoming a bit strained.

"Yes, my sponsor gave me two silver nobles to spend. To celebrate my getting the insignia," Satella explained. "Do you want-"

"Nope, that's fine," Subaru said with a sigh. "I'm just thinking that our problem has suddenly gotten much much more complicated."

Subaru covered his eyes and shook his head.

"What do you mean?"

"Tella, please wait here for a second," Subaru said. He glared at Puck. "I'm going to talk to the merchant. I'll be right back," He said sourly to the flying cat.

Puck's expression didn't change as Subaru walked away.

"Puck, why did he say it like that?" Satella asked.

Subaru with dark thoughts running through his mind, wandered back over to the peddler.

"Hey again, can I do something for you?" The peddler asked cautiously.

"Got any clothes? Like a long robe, maybe something hooded?" Subaru asked.

The peddler reached behind him, rummaging around in a trunk. He pulled out a long white robe with a large hood and red triangles emblazoned on the fabric. It looked almost monk-like. "I think this might be the closest thing I got," The peddler explained apologetically. "Women in some sects in Gusteko are required to wear them up. I got one shipped here by mistake."

"That works," Subaru said. "How much?"

"How about three silver pieces?" The merchant replied.

"Done," Subaru said to the merchant's evident surprise.

Subaru knew that the merchant had likely given him a ludicrously high price for the robe and he had expected Subaru to haggle with him. Under other circumstances, Subaru might have done just that but instinct told him he was running out of time.

Subaru dropped a gold piece on the counter and the merchant looked a little confused at this method of payment but obediently gave him seven silvers back.

"Thanks," Subaru said cheerfully. "Great doing business with ya!" Subaru threw the robe over his shoulder and started walking back to where Satella and Puck waited.

While he walked, Subaru thought about the last magic he had acquired: *Indomitable*. What did that do?

He tried to trigger it and he felt a strange tingling sensation all over his body.

Then his heart tried to explode in his chest.

Subaru fell to his knees, gasping for breath. The tingling sensation had immediately disappeared and his heart muscle throbbed as though it was being squeezed.

What the fuck was that?! What kind of weird power is that? Is it like cigarettes? You use it and you die? What the fuck?

Subaru staggered back to his feet.

OK, the 'Game Master' in this RPG clearly likes messing with me, He thought.

Subaru returned to Satella and found her waiting patiently in the square with Puck.

"Here put this on," Subaru said, handing her the robe.

"Why should Lia wear that?" Puck asked suspiciously.

"Because if the thief is in there, she is going to recognize Tella immediately," Subaru told him with a sigh. "If the thief spots Tella, she is going to run. So the choice is for Tella to either wear a disguise or to wait out here. I took a wild guess at which one she would prefer."

Satella had already pulled on the robe without question. It was much too big for her and the hood covered almost her whole face while the voluminous sleeves concealed her hands.

"Alright, Lia," Puck muttered. "I'm going to hide in the crystal for a bit then. Call me if you need me."

The magical cat disappeared.

"Huh, that's a nice trick," Subaru commented.

Satella and Subaru began to walk towards the location of the loot house.

"Tella, I've been meaning to ask you: How do you get 'Lia' from 'Satella?' Subaru asked.

Satella glanced away. "It's just a pet name," She mumbled.

Well, yeah but that doesn't really answer my question. Whatever, we have bigger problems.

"Tella," Subaru began. "How many people knew that you had gotten that insignia thing today?"

Satella thought about it for a moment. "My sponsor knew. A group of kingdom officials. Some of the royal guards. Whatever servants were attending to all of them today."

"OK, that's a big crowd," Subaru muttered. "Who knew that you would be wandering the market alone today?"

"I wasn't alone, I was with Puck," Satella corrected.

Subaru sighed. "Duly noted but who knew you would be there?"

Satella thought back. "My sponsor, his staff, and I told a few of the nobles he met with that morning."

"Still a big crowd," Subaru sighed.

"Why are you asking me about this?" Satella asked.

Subaru walked in silence for a moment. "One more question: Is this insignia thing really important? Do you have any enemies or can you think of anyone who would want to take it from you?"

Satella was silent. "The insignia is very important," She finally admitted. "But why are you asking me about enemies? I'm a silver haired half-elf. Nobody really likes me but I don't think that would have anything to do with the insignia."

"People don't like elves here?" Subaru asked in surprise. He assumed that if they all looked like Satella, they would have been the most popular race on the planet.

Satella glanced away and didn't answer.

Subaru frowned but decided not to press her. It probably didn't matter much right now anyway. "Tella," Subaru began slowly. "Originally I assumed that you just got mugged when you lost that insignia but now I think there's maybe something else going on here."

"What do you mean?"

"You only had the thing for an hour or two before it was stolen from you. That's quite a coincidence."

Satella sighed. "I know. I was careless."

"No, someone else reaching into your pocket and stealing your stuff doesn't have much to do with carelessness," Subaru disagreed. "The problem is that the thief left the purse behind. That's *really* really bad."

Satella tilted her head. "I don't understand."

"She robs you and takes your purse. She removes the insignia from the purse, drops the purse and keeps running. Why do you think she did that?" Subaru asked.

Satella put a finger in her mouth while she thought. "So that I'd take the purse and stop chasing her?"

"No, no," Subaru dismissed. "She's running for her life. I don't know what the punishment is for thieves around here but I seriously doubt that it's anything pleasant. The only thought in her head should be to get away. Instead she distracts herself long enough to open the purse, grab something out of the purse, and then drops it on the ground before continuing her escape. She does all this even though she could hear from the purse's clinking that there was still money inside."

"She drops the purse as a distraction to give her a head start?" Satella guessed.

"No, it means that she knew what was in the purse. She wasn't looking for money. She had been told to grab something specific out of *your* pocket and out of *that* purse and she paused her escape long enough to make sure that she had the thing that she had been told to get. Somebody put her up to this," Subaru explained.

"But who would do that?" Satella asked.

Subaru threw his hands over his head. "I don't frigging know!" He said in exasperation. "I know nothing about this place! I don't even know what country I'm in. You and Puck represent sixty six percent of the people I know on this planet. I don't even know what this insignia thing is or why anyone would want it. Is it just jewelry or is there something else important about it?"

Subaru's question had been rhetorical but he didn't miss the way Satella looked away when he asked.

Subaru bite his lip. Satella was clearly hiding something from him. He debated asking and finally decided to let it pass for the time being.

"So anyway, that all suggests that the thief may already have a buyer lined up," Subaru changed the subject.

"Then will she not come to the loot house?" Satella asked, furrowing her brow.

"Tough to say but it's our only lead right now. At worst, if we tell the people at the loot house that we're in the market for a unique piece of jewelry, the thief might find out about it and approach us to hear our bid," Subaru replied.

Satella folded her arms cross her chest, the voluminous sleeves dangling. "But what do we do then? Do you think we'll be able to take the insignia back from her? There could be a lot of people in that loot house. We might be outmatched in a fight. Maybe we should ask the guards for help?"

Subaru was scratching his chin. "Actually, I was thinking that we might just try to buy it from her."

"We're going to *buy* something that she stole from me?!" Satella asked. "What sense does that make?"

"A lot of sense, actually, because what I really want to buy from her is information," Subaru clarified.

"Information about what?"

"Is there another bidder? Did she really target you at random or did someone put her up to it? And if so, who?" Subaru explained. "That information is worth quite a bit of money, don't you think?"

"Do you really think she would tell us that?"

"If we offer her enough gold, maybe," Subaru shrugged. "And there's a good chance we might be able to meet the other bidder for free. If she does have another bidder it's likely that she'll want to put us in the same room so we'll bid against each other."

"Subaru, I don't know what you were assuming but... I don't really have any money. I only have the two coins I was given today," Satella replied looking awkward.

"I have money. I should have enough to put down a serious bid. I hope," Subaru said.

Well, again, we have no idea what a gold coin is worth let alone thirty six of them. What can it buy you? Can it buy a nice meal? A herd of cattle? A small townhouse? I'd ask Satella but I get the impression she doesn't know much about money either.

Satella glanced away, looking uncomfortable. "I can't let you do that for me," She murmured.

"You'll let me do that for you because you have to," Subaru replied. "It's the only way that we'll get your trinket back. If being in debt makes you uncomfortable, then we'll figure out how to balance the scales later. But right now we need to get your treasure back," He paused. "Besides, after we recover your treasure, we can have some fun debating how many Tella kisses you think that it's worth," He joked.

Satella froze in place and stared at Subaru wide eyed.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding!" Subaru said hastily. "I was just trying to relieve the tension! Relax, Tella. I'm just happy to help you out. You don't owe me anything," He smiled. "Like a wise man once told me: 'Friends carry no debts.'"

Satella hesitated, looking both shocked and confused for a moment then she resumed walking while looking away from Subaru.

Great thinking, Subaru. He thought to himself. Because any woman who has just lost her greatest treasure to a pickpocket really wants to spend time flirting with a complete stranger in a dirty slum. Also, good job once again provoking the magic flying cat who has already threatened to curse you for inappropriate thoughts toward his daughter. Consider any theory you had about Reason and Judgment increasing your intelligence officially disproved.

Subaru groaned and triggered *Reason and Judgment* to figure out how to recover from that verbal blunder. He felt his confidence surge.

On second thought, Subaru, why do you have such deep misgivings about what you said? He mused to himself. Women are attracted to confidence. Arguably, you made the wrong comment at the wrong time but she'll forget about that quickly once you find her treasure. You laid the foundation for future opportunities. You prevented her from viewing you as 'just a friend.' You might have stumbled but you'll recover quickly. You can accomplish things. Satella will respect that. And if one of the things you wish to accomplish is winning Satella's heart, why would you assume that you'd be any less successful at that? Just focus on the matter at hand.

Subaru restarted time.

Subaru couldn't think of anything more intelligent to say after that little slip but at least *Reason and Judgment's* confidence had washed away any feelings of embarrassment he felt. That was something.

They approached the location that the merchant had referred. There was a large building with a strange sloping roof that had a variety of small holes in it.

OK, that looks like it could be a tavern; A condemned, abandoned tavern but a tavern none the less.

"Tella, one more thing: When we go in, always assuming that this place isn't just an abandoned building and I got cheated out of a gold coin," Subaru mused. "I want you to keep your hood down so no one can recognize you. Let me do all the talking. Also," Subaru paused awkwardly. "I'm going to be lying constantly so please try not to react to my bullshit."

Subaru thought Satella might object but she simply nodded and pulled the hood down so all that could be seen was her mouth.

Alright, here goes nothing. Subaru bounded up the stairs and pounded on the massive door.

He heard heavy footsteps approaching from inside.

"What's the password?" A gruff voice asked.

Password? Great. Subaru sighed. *The merchant didn't mention a password!*

Oh well, brazen it out. "I've got money!" Subaru yelled.

The door slowly opened and a simply enormous man with brown skin and gray hair peaked out suspiciously. "That's not the password," He growl.

"Really?" Subaru asked. "It always opens doors where I come from."

"Yeah, real cute," The old man snorted but Subaru saw a slight smile on his face. "What do you want?"

"We're looking to make a purchase of a valuable item and someone suggested that a fellow named Rom was exactly the person we should talk to about that," Subaru explained.

The old man stepped out onto his front porch. He had to be nine feet tall at least. "And just what exactly are you looking for?"

"I assume you're Rom, then?" Subaru asked. The merchant had said Rom was a giant and he hadn't been exaggerating.

The old man didn't respond.

"Nice to meet you. It's a private matter and perhaps one best not discussed on the doorstep," Subaru said cheerfully. "Could we persuade you to pour us a drink while we talk?"

The old man considered it for a moment and then turned around. "Fine," He grumbled, leading them inside.

Wow. I expected that getting in here would be a lot more difficult. Then again, if I was Rom's size, I guess I wouldn't worry much about letting people in either.

Rom took a seat at a long table and Subaru and Satella sat down directly across from him.

"So who are you guys, anyway?" Rom asked.

"My name is Subaru, this is my sister Tella," Subaru replied. He glanced at Satella but if she had reacted to being called his sister, the robe covered any sign.

"Alright, so what are you looking for?" Rom asked.

"My boss sent me here to *procure* a very special piece of jewelry," Subaru lied.

"Procure?" Rom asked, pulling a large dusty bottle off the floor and setting it on the table.

"I'm in town because the owner was slightly reluctant to sell," Subaru explained cheerfully.

Rom looks like a heavy drinker; his eyes are discolored and they have broken blood vessels. Should I ask him to pour me a sip? It might make him think of me as a kindred spirit.

"Ah. *That* kind of procurement," Rom said, taking a swig straight from a bottle and belching loudly.

On second thought, maybe I won't ask for a sip. Rom's breath smells like kerosene.

"So what's all this got to do with me?" Rom asked.

"I had a friend watching the target: tracking her movements, and checking for weak spots while I got ready to make my move. Unfortunately for me, before I could do that, someone else made a move and ran off with the goods," Subaru sighed.

Rom burst out laughing.

"OK, buddy. It's really not all *that* funny," Subaru said in feigned annoyance.

"Guessing your boss won't be too happy with you," Rom said with a chuckle.

"Nope, my continued good health is in serious jeopardy right now," Subaru admitted. "That's what brings me here. If a sneak thief grabs a piece of jewelry then they usually want to unload it quick. So if they try to sell it here, maybe I can still buy it for my boss."

"Well, if somebody's looking to sell something down here, no questions asked, this is usually the place they come," Rom admitted. "Do you know who your thief was?"

Subaru activated *Reason and Judgment* to hit the pause button.

Hmm. This is a loaded question. On the one hand, if Rom knows the girl, he could tell her there was an interested buyer who was willing to pay through the nose and that might get her to come here and take my bid. On the other hand, if Rom knows the girl, he might decide that us looking for someone connected to him is an unacceptable risk and clam up.

Subaru debated with himself back and forth. He tried scanning Rom to see if that would give him any insight. He found a ton of scars and healed wounds suggesting a background full of fighting with weapons, probably an old soldier or a former gladiator. But nothing he saw helped him decide what the right response to Rom's question was.

Finally Subaru restarted the world. "I have a description," Subaru said.

Honestly, it's the only rational response to that question given the story I was telling Rom. Whoever I'm pretending was watching Satella, they would certainly have provided me with a description of the thief.

Subaru continued: "Short, thin, blond hair, red eyes."

Rom stiffened.

Oh ho. He does know her. Is that good or bad?

"And what do you want with her?" Rom asked. His voice was casual but his massive muscles had tensed.

OK, this is the critical question.

"I'm not looking to start any trouble here, Rom!" Subaru said, holding his hand up as if under oath. "She has property I need, and we're just here to try and buy it. That's it. I feel no animosity toward her, and, assuming I can still get the damn thing, she actually saved me a spot of trouble by picking it up for me. I'm just looking to tell her that she has an interested buyer. That's all."

Rom stared hard at Subaru and Subaru met that gaze with a smile. Rom wasn't convinced but he wasn't kicking them out either. Subaru guessed that he was thinking it over.

The door flew open. "Hey, Gramps. I'm back."

Subaru turned to see the thief walk into the loot house.

Subaru quickly turned back to Rom, raising a hand in sign of peaceable intent and remaining seated. He grabbed hold of Satella's hand under the table.

Satella tensed for a moment as if ready to spring at the thief and then slowly relaxed and remained seated. Subaru decided not to let go of her hand. He might need to signal her again.

Besides, her hand felt really nice in his.

"Speak of the devil," Subaru shrugged at Rom.

The old regarded him suspiciously from under his bristling brows.

At least he doesn't look like he's going to get violent as long as we don't start anything, Subaru thought.

"Who are these guys, Gramps?" The girl asked, walking over to the table and sitting down beside Rom.

Rom took a deep breath. "This is Subaru. He came here looking for you, Felt."

"For *me*?" Felt blinked.

Huh. She's actually kind of cute, even with those blood red eyes.

Subaru cleared his throat. "I'm an interested buyer for something I think you have," He said.

Felt chuckled and folded her hands behind her head. "I doubt it. I don't have anything."

"My boss sent me to town to steal something from an elf girl," Subaru explained.

Felt's eyes widened and she drew back from the table.

Subaru held up his hands in a stop gesture. "I'm not here to punish you, Felt! Look, you have something I need and I want to buy it. That's all. I doubt that you want to keep a piece of jewelry. I'm sure it would look very nice on you but you'd probably rather have the money anyway. Sell it to me, I'll pay you more than a fair amount and everybody's happy."

Felt chewed her lower lip, looking at Subaru thoughtfully. "How much money do you have?" She challenged.

Subaru pulled out his bag of money and dropped the bag on the table. He took out a few gold coins to clarify what was inside. "I have a little," He deadpanned.

Felt stared at the bag with open greed. "How much is in there?"

"How about you show me that you actually still have the goods first?" Subaru replied with a pleasant smile.

Felt sighed and rolled her eyes. She pouted for a moment with her arms folded tightly across her chest but ultimately she pulled out a small silver badge with a dragon emblazoned across it and a small red jewel in the center.

Tella's hand tightened on his. That was all Subaru needed to know.

"Yup, that's it. How much are you asking for it?" Subaru asked.

The girl was silent a moment, weighing her answer. "I was promised twenty gold coins for it."

"I can beat that," Subaru replied but his mind was racing. "Wait, someone promised you that? You've already found an interested buyer? That was fast," He said, trying to sound barely interested.

"Well, actually they hired me to steal it from the elf girl in the first place," Felt corrected.

Tella squeezed his hand.

Subaru tried to feign surprise. "There's someone else interested in this piece?"

"Did your boss send two people?" Rom asked.

That's a good idea! I should roll with that. Thanks, Rom.

"Maybe," Subaru shrugged. "Who is this other person? Do they work for the boss?"

"She'll be here soon," Felt explained. "She said she'd be here around sundown to pick up the loot. It's only fair to wait and see if she would raise her offer."

"Why wait?" Subaru asked. "I'll beat her offer right now and we can get this wrapped up."

"Sure," Felt almost purred. "But I like the idea of two interested buyers. We might just get a bidding war going."

"Twenty gold coins is a lot, Felt," Rom commented with a worried frown. "Maybe you should just take the profit and get out. I'm starting to worry that you might have stepped into something big and dangerous. Twenty coins would get you out of the slums. You could have a real life."

"Yeah and for thirty I bet we could *both* get out, Gramps!" Felt replied.

"Not me, Felt. I'm too old. Too tied to this place," Rom shook his head.

Felt was about to reply but the door opened again and a woman walked in.

"Oh, my other buyer has arrived," Felt said.

Subaru instantly paused the world and examined the woman carefully. She was tall and very beautiful with pale skin and flowing dark hair. If there was an ounce of fat on her body it was all in her large breasts. Subaru couldn't detect very much about her except that she was hiding a pair of twin short swords under her clothes.

I don't like this. Hidden weapons are never a good sign. If you're carrying weapons as a deterrent, you don't hide them. People hide weapons on their person so they could ambush prey.

"Other buyer? Does that mean I have competition?" The woman asked mildly, taking a seat near the end of the table.

"Yeah, a friend of mine told me that Felt picked up something my boss wanted. So I came here to buy it," Subaru replied.

"How interesting. And who might you be?" She asked. The woman had a warm smile that Subaru instantly distrusted.

"I'm Subaru Natsuki and this is my sister Tella," He replied.

"Tella Natsuki?" The woman asked languidly.

"Yeah it's a nice name, don't you think?" Subaru drawled. "So who might you be?"

"My name is Elsa," She replied.

"Elsa...?" Subaru asked.

"Just Elsa," She said with a smile.

OK, also not a great sign.

"OK," Felt said, sounding impatient. "If everyone is now properly acquainted, can we get down to the sale?"

Subaru and Elsa glanced at Felt and then back at each other. Rom was rubbing his forehead and grimacing.

"I already made you an offer," Elsa said carelessly. "Twenty gold pieces for the trinket."

Felt pointed at Subaru. "And what have you got?"

Subaru was about to offer Felt twenty one but he hesitated. He thought of all the garbage and broken down old buildings he'd seen in the slums. Felt said she could get her and the old man out of here so...

"Thirty gold coins," Subaru said firmly.

Felt's eyes glittered with greed but she swung her attention back to Elsa. "And how about you?"

"Sorry. My employer only gave me twenty gold coins for the job so that's all I have," She said with a shrug.

"Oh," Felt said in disappointment.

Subaru glanced at Rom and they exchanged a worried look.

This woman is way too apathetic about being out bidden. Something is wrong here.

"Well, I guess it's all yours," Felt said, handing him the insignia.

"But there is one question that I'd like to ask you," Elsa interjected.

Felt pulled back the insignia, perhaps hoping she could yet squeeze more money out of the transaction.

"What's that?" Felt asked.

"What do you want to do with the trinket?"

Subaru blinked, realizing that she was talking to him. "My boss wants it. He told me to get it for him in a tone that did not encourage failure. He didn't tell me what it was or why he wanted it or what he planned to do with it," Subaru replied.

"And might your boss have a name?" Elsa asked.

"Not one that he'd generally care to have known," Subaru replied. "Knowledge is power after all. He'd be horribly upset if I gave away his name for nothing at all."

"Oh?"

"Of course, if I got something in exchange, I bet I could persuade him that it was a good trade," Subaru continued.

"And what did you have in mind?"

"Your employer must be curious who else is interested in the elf girl. My boss is very likely to have the same question about your employer. Why don't we swap?" Subaru suggested.

No way in hell she's stupid enough to take this deal-

"Sounds fair," She shrugged.

Subaru frowned.

"I'm a member of a guild of assassins out of Gusteko that fulfill contracts all over the world. I work for Mother Capella. She's the one who sent me to buy the trinket," Elsa said.

Subaru drummed his fingers on the table. "Yeah, but was Capella the one who made the contract or the person who just assigned it to you?"

"Oh, she just assigned it. I can't talk about my actual employer. It's against the rules," She smiled apologetically.

"Hm. That's... that's really bad..." Subaru said in a sinking voice. He glanced at Rom and saw a similar fear in his eyes.

Rom slowly stepped away from the table, pulling Felt with him.

Felt looked at her grandfather in confusion.

"What's really bad?" Elsa asked.

"Well, let's see. You just admitted to being a professional assassin and gave us your boss's name. Normally private information is delivered, you know, *in private* but you just told the entire room about it. You don't seem to care who in this room knows said information. What conclusion can we draw from that?"

"That she's not planning on letting anyone out of this room alive," Rom replied, reaching behind his bar and picking up a heavy club. Felt stared at him with huge eyes.

"Good work, Rom," Subaru said. "I guess age really does bring wisdom."

"You're very clever," Elsa commented, showing no irritation at all. "I was hoping that you'd just tell me what I wanted to know. I can always torture it out of you later but I really don't like to be distracted when I torture someone by little details like 'did they ever actually answer my questions.' Too bad."

Subaru stood up, pulling Satella away from the table and stepping in front of her.

I still don't have any weapons. And I really doubt my 'cursed phone' trick is going to work here.

"Stay where you are!" Satella ordered, throwing her hood back. Felt stared wide eyed at the girl she had robbed and even Elsa looked surprised.

"I see," Elsa said, glancing between Satella and Subaru. She started to laugh. "That's amazing! You were lying to me the entire time and I never even caught on! How delightful. I can't wait to see what color your guts are!" She drew a pair of short curved swords.

"This woman is very strange," Subaru said, glancing at the giant. Rom looked like the kind of guy who could handle anything but Elsa's confidence did not seem like a bluff. She had taken actions that only made sense given the assumption that she would eventually kill everyone in this room so she clearly believed that she could.

Elsa rushed at Subaru and Satella, almost too fast to see but before she got close, ice crystals appeared out of thin air and launched themselves at Elsa like tiny missiles.

"Just a heads up," Puck said conversationally, appearing out of nowhere. "Threatening my daughter is a *really* bad idea."

Elsa danced away, managing to dodge the projectiles.

Rom tried to smash the woman with his club but she leapt at him and, with seemingly no effort, Elsa nearly sliced Rom's club in two causing him to stumble backwards.

Elsa bounced off Rom and threw herself at Satella with blades extended but Subaru pushed the elf out of the way. He saw Elsa flying toward him and he used *Reason and Judgment* to pause the world.

Elsa hung suspended in mid air, her wicked blades already descending toward Subaru's midsection.

Subaru looked around and scanned everything he could see but no options presented themselves.

You don't have any options here, He observed calmly. That knife is coming straight at you and it's likely to rip clear through your body without even slowing down. There's no time to evade it and you don't have anything to block it with. This is very... frustrating.

The moments dragged on in the timeless eternity granted by *Reason and Judgment*. Subaru kept staring at Elsa's sharp blade hanging motionless next to him. This would normally be terrifying but the blanketing calm the magic provided let him look at it objectively.

I need a plan, Subaru thought. There had to be some way out of this mess.

The magic's compulsive calm was starting to fade as Subaru's terror surged to new heights.

I only see one possible outcome. As soon as time is restarted, Elsa is going to slash me and... she is very likely to cut me in half.

There has to be a solution but I can't find it! Of course, there's always Indomitable, the wondrous power which as far as I can tell does absolutely nothing except hurt me.

I'm... going to die here, Subaru realized with something like wonder.

I really am going to die here. There is no plot armor, no last minute rescue, nothing is going to save me from this, He thought to himself.

Subaru's face tried to spasm. He wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or cry and felt like he might do a little of both.

Wow. I can't believe how dumb I was. I'm not the hero. This isn't some world designed for me. I just got summoned here to die in a slum. God, I was such an idiot. Subaru silently laughed through his sobs. I was nothing in my own world, why would I be anything else here? This isn't my story. It's Satella's, it's Felt's, maybe even Rom's, but never mine. I played my part and now the story goes on without me. Just another loser; a bit character written out of the story that absolutely no one will miss.

Subaru tried to steady himself.

Alright. I'm not the hero. But I helped Satella. That's something. I even pushed her out of the way of Elsa's blade and stopped her from being killed.

I'm no hero but I did good things. I saved Satella. It's... really not such a bad way to die honestly. Hell, it's better than most people get. Is it really that much worse than slowly dying of cancer all alone in a hospital bed?

Subaru glanced at Satella, frozen while falling to the floor and he saw her face was twisted in fear as she reached toward him. She knew he was about to die and that he had died to save her.

Subaru smiled sadly. *Satella knows that I'm about to die. She actually looks sad that I'm about to die. Maybe she might even miss me after I die.*

Subaru chuckled ruefully. *I wish she really was the costar in my story. She's beautiful, kind, and gentle. Maybe some girls really are worth dying for. Too bad I won't live to find out if I could have been somebody she loved.*

Subaru looked at the knife and took a deep breath.

I am freaking terrified. Not just of the idea of dying but the way I'm about to die. Being sliced through the belly won't be an instant dead. It'll be slow. It'll hurt. I'll probably cry and beg and sob like a loser.

I want to try and die bravely. I want to die like a man; partially to look good for Satella but also, I want to spend my final moments pretending that I really was the brave hero I always wanted to be.

The hero I never could be.

Subaru steadied himself and felt the fear recede a bit.

OK. OK, I'm ready. Alright, no that's a fucking lie. I am absolutely not ready for this. I don't think I'd be ready in fifty years for this but right now I'm as ready as I'm going to get. I'll restart time and then... what's going to happen will happen.

Subaru paused for a moment. *I'm going to trigger Indomitable when I restart time. Who knows, maybe it will do something.*

Subaru took a deep breath and the world flowed back into motion. Elsa continued her slice and Subaru activated *Indomitable*.

Elsa's short sword slammed into Subaru's side... and her stroke stopped as if her the blade had struck a mountain. She tried it again but she couldn't so much as scratch Subaru's skin.

Wow. Neat.

Then Subaru doubled over, feeling like his heart was going to explode as *Indomitable* faded. Elsa went for another strike into Subaru's torso but a blizzard of bullet-like ice crystals blasted Elsa away.

Subaru felt a ripping pain in his side as Elsa went flying.

Ah! Guess she got me with that one, Subaru said, pressing hard against his side. Subaru looked at the jagged wound in his hip and stomach and almost passed out. Then he felt like he was going to throw up.

Calm down! That won't help anything! That's a big cut there but at least it doesn't seem to be all that deep. Of course, you could have fooled me, judging by the pain!

"Get away from him!" Satella ordered, sounding enraged.

"Oh boy. You really shouldn't have made Lia mad," Puck said.

The loot house door opened and everyone turned to look. Reinhard calmly walked into the loot house, his uniform spotless. "What's going on here?" He asked in confusion.

No time to wonder why he's here!

"Reinhard, look out!" Subaru tried to yell with barely any breath to spare. "That woman is dangerous!"

"Is she now?" He asked calmly. He looked at Elsa and his eyes narrowed. "You're the Bowel Hunter, aren't you?"

Elsa retreated a step and fell into a guard stance.

Rather than draw the long sword belted at his side, Reinhard stepped forward and quickly picked up a rusty old sword that was lying on a nearby crate.

"Please, aid me in this battle," Reinhard asked the sword politely. He turned to Elsa and his voice became stern: "You are a killer, a marauder, and a danger to the people of this kingdom. As a knight of the realm I shall bring justice upon you myself."

Reinhard swung his blade and the world dissolved into blue flame. There was the sound of an explosion and Subaru had to squeeze his eyes shut.

When Subaru could see again, half the building's roof was gone. Elsa perched on the rafter like some kind of impossible spider. Then she leapt away and fled.

"Ow!" Subaru whimpered as his side throbbed and his legs nearly buckled.

Reinhard had been about to go after Elsa but upon hearing Subaru's pained cry, he was at Subaru's side in an instant.

Reinhard knelt down and inspected Subaru's the wound. "This is a bad cut," Reinhard said gravely. "We need to get it treated."

"Good advice," Subaru repeated, breathing shallowly. "Just let me do one thing first."

Subaru limped slowly over to Felt who sat trembling in her Grandfather's massive arms.

Subaru crouched down in front of them. "I need you to give me what you took," He told Felt gently, holding out his hand.

Felt nodded and put the insignia in Subaru's palm.

Felt bit her lip. "I'm sorry that I took it," She said.

"Well, I'm not the person who can forgive you for that," Subaru said with a meaningful glance at Satella. "But you and me? We're good," He assured her.

Subaru reached down and pulled out his money pouch. "I believe that we agreed on thirty gold coins," He said, handing her the bag. "That's about 36 gold coins. You can keep the extra to pay for damages we caused to the house."

Felt stared at the bag with wide eyes. "You're giving me this?" Felt whispered.

Subaru shrugged. "Well, we had a deal, didn't we? That gold should be enough to get you guys out of here right? Start over someplace good?" He smiled at her even though his side throbbed painfully. "I know you don't want to owe me anything so let's just call it a business investment. You can help me play some pranks on Tella sometime!" He laughed.

Felt looked at Subaru in disbelief, her red eyes filling up with tears.

"Hey, no crying," Subaru chided with a smile. "I'm the only one who got hurt in this fight so I'm the only one allowed to cry."

Subaru painfully limped his way back over to Satella. Reinhard was standing near her with a confused expression.

"Lady Satella," Subaru began formally. Subaru noticed everyone around him jump when he said this but he didn't know why.

Satella just looked away awkwardly. "I promised you that I would return your insignia," He held it out to her in his hand. "I've fulfilled my promise," Subaru said with a proud smile. The pride he felt right now almost eclipsed the pain of his wound. He felt like he'd accomplished something and that he'd done it well. It wasn't slaying the dragon. It wasn't saving the world. But he said he would help Satella and he had done so.

"Let me see that!" Reinhard demanded, grabbing Subaru's hand and staring at the tiny red jewel glowing on the badge. "Impossible," He whispered.

Subaru gave Reinhard a pained look. "Look, Reinhard, buddy; I am *super* grateful to you for your timely rescue. Seriously, I owe you big time," Subaru said as Reinhard looked at him with his mouth agape. "But I'm trying to have a moment here with Satella and you're kind of stepping all over it."

Subaru looked back at Satella and smiled at her. Satella stood there, seemingly frozen in place. "Here you go, Satella." Subaru said, depositing the insignia in her palm.

Satella's face twisted with guilt and shame. "Subaru," She whimpered. "That's not my real name."

Subaru blinked. "It's not?"

Subaru felt something rip in his side and he fell to the floor. Blood was pouring out of his side. A lot of blood.

"Hang on, Subaru!" Reinhard said, trying to staunch the wound. Satella knelt down beside him in tears and Rom and Felt hurried over as well.

"Subaru!" Satella cried out.

Subaru reached up toward Satella's face and she caught his hand. Her face was divinely exquisite even when it was covered with tears, even when the rest of the world was growing dark and blurry around him.

"Satella?" Subaru asked in a wheezy voice.

"Yes, Subaru?" Satella asked crying.

"What's your real name?" Subaru asked gently as the darkness took him.

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2**

Subaru slowly regained consciousness. He became aware that he was lying in bed.

Fuck, that's bright. God damn it, Mom! Stop coming into my room and opening the shades! I'll wake up when I'm ready!

Damn. All that was just a dream? It seemed so real...

OK, well you know what? It was actually a pretty great dream. I got to meet the beautiful princess. I got to prove that when shit got real I could be brave, I could be selfless. Sure, I'm still pretty useless in real life but I proved that at least I could try. I even got a heroic death thrown in there! If I'd gotten a kiss or a handjob out of it, the dream would have been downright perfect.

Guess it's time to wake up. I wonder what Mom is making for breakfast.

Subaru yawned and opened his eyes.

Subaru was in a brightly lit, well-furnished bedroom that he'd never seen before. Reinhard was sitting in a chair nearby.

"Reinhard?" Subaru asked in confusion.

"Lord Subaru!" Reinhard said, jumping to his feet. He wore a grin from ear to ear. "Thank the Gods, you're awake!"

Subaru looked around the unfamiliar room then reached down and felt the scar on his side. "It wasn't a dream...", He whispered. "Reinhard, what happened? Where am I?"

"You're at my home, the Astrea Manor in the capitol," Reinhard explained. "I've been sitting here for nearly two days waiting for you to awaken. To be candid, I had very little hope, the weapons of the Bowel Hunter are lethal, coated in a poison that prevents clotting. Our doctors tended to you for nearly six hours trying to close the wound. They told us your survival was most unlikely. But you have some strength in you, Lord Subaru."

"Two days?" Subaru asked in disbelief.

"Well, two nights and one day to be technical. I-"

"Tella!" Subaru suddenly remembered. "Is she alright?!"

Reinhard cocked his head at Subaru. "I'm not familiar with-"

"Satella," Subaru said. Reinhard recoiled and his jaw dropped at this name. "The silver haired elf I was with... no, wait. She told me that Satella wasn't her real name. Right," Subaru laid back against his pillow and closed his eyes. "You know, I've had girls refuse to talk to me before but this is the first time I ever met a girl who wanted to avoid me so badly that she gave me a fake name. Can't help but feel a little rejected," Subaru muttered, giving Reinhard a self-deprecating chuckle.

Reinhard looked like he had fifteen questions and wasn't sure which one to ask first. "Um, my lord, if you are referring to the Lady Emilia..."

"Is that her name?" Subaru asked. "Emilia... Satella was a pretty name," Subaru mused and Reinhard cringed again, "But yeah, Emilia is probably much better."

Reinhard coughed. "Yes, Emilia. I'm not entirely certain what you are referring to, but the Lady Emilia was not attempting to avoid you. Quite the contrary. She showed great concern for your health and comfort."

"Wait, really?" Subaru said, rising out of bed with a smile.

"Very much so," Reinhard said. "She stayed by your side through the entire operation. Her sponsor Lord Roswaal came to collect her that night but she refused to depart. She was only persuaded to leave when the doctors assured her that you were on the mend. She asked me to extend to you her deepest gratitude. Lord Roswaal echoed that statement and requested that you call upon him at your convenience so that he might thank you personally."

"Wow," Subaru said, his grin broadening. "That's... that's really something," He paused. "And Felt and Rom came through OK?"

"Merely a few bumps and bruises. They were both very concerned about you," Reinhard explained. "Miss Felt wanted to come with you to the healers but Rom explained it might not be wise for a woman in her... position to be associated with nobility and Felt finally agreed."

Subaru looked down for a moment. "Reinhard," He began. "You saved my life. In fact, I think you've saved my life *twice* so far. I'm truly in your debt for your kindness. I don't have any idea how I could ever make it up to you, but I promise to try," Subaru said earnestly.

Reinhard looked uncomfortable. "It was really nothing-"

"Hey!" Subaru shouted in mock anger. "I don't like people who refer to my life as nothing!"

Reinhard's eyes widened in shock. "Oh no! My Lord, I had no intention-"

"Relax, Reinhard," Subaru said with a laugh. "I was only teasing you. But seriously, thank you for everything. I mean that. If you hadn't appeared when you did, I would have died. I think Emilia and Felt would have died as well. The weird woman was even kicking old Rom around like he was nothing. Who was she?"

Reinhard's eyes darkened. "Elsa Granhiert, The Bowel Hunter," He spat.

"Excuse me?"

"She's a notorious assassin and mass murderer who has plagued the continent for years. She's been the death of entire villages," Reinhard explained. "Lady Emilia and Miss Felt told me how you faced down the Bowel Hunter barehanded. That was a remarkable display of valor. I know strong knights who would have fled rather than face the Bowel Hunter alone, and you confronted her unarmed," Reinhard shook his head in wonder. "You are a remarkably brave man, Lord Subaru."

Subaru burst out laughing to Reinhard's surprise. "There is a fine line between courage and stupidity. Thank you for the one you picked," Subaru shook his head ruefully. "Also what's with all the 'Lord Subaru' business. Did I get a promotion while I was asleep?" Subaru paused. "Wait, is that how people behave around here? Am I being rude by not referring to you as 'Lord Reinhard' or 'my lord' or something? I didn't mean to!"

"Oh no!" Reinhard assured him. "I am not a lord!"

"Well then I appreciate the courtesy but I certainly can't be one. I'm just a bum who wound up in the kingdom with no idea how I got here and not a cent to my name," Subaru replied with a tired smile.

Yeah, that's going to be a problem sooner rather than later. I'm in a strange country I know nothing about and I have no skills and no prospects. I've got no illusions that Reinhard is going to be generous enough to let me stay here forever and even if he is I can't let him do that. I'm already deep enough in his debt as it is.

What can I do next? I don't have any applicable skills in this world. I can't even read or write the language so really the only thing I have to offer is manual labor. I've got no real connections in this country outside of Reinhard and maybe Sat-... Emilia. Gee, maybe I could work as her butler. Wouldn't that be fun? Nope, can't read or write the language here, so I'm unqualified for that job.

Guessing the next few weeks are going to be very unpleasant. Maybe if I ask Felt and Rom nicely, they'll teach me how to survive down in the slums.

"Lord Subaru," Reinhard said, interrupting Subaru's train of thought. "I need to show you this," Reinhard walked over to Subaru's bed and dropped a small item into his palm.

It was a silver token engraved with a dragon. A small red jewel was embedded in the middle.

"Wait a second!" Subaru exclaimed. "This was Emilia's! Why the hell do you have it?"

"This is not Lady Emilia's, Lord Subaru," Reinhard corrected him. "This insignia is yours."

"No! I never had one! The one in the loot house was Emilia's! And just as soon as I can find some pants I need to return it to her!" Subaru said, struggling out of bed and almost falling as his legs struggled to support him.

Reinhard reached out a hand to steady him.

"Um, speaking of pants, any chance of getting some?" Subaru asked shamefaced.

"I took the liberty of preparing you some clothes. Your original garment got rather... messy from your wound," Reinhard said, picking some clothing off a nearby dresser and handing them to Subaru.

"Oh right, I guess that was a lot of blood," Subaru said, taking the clothes. They weren't of a style he recognized but he assumed it was common enough in this world, unless Reinhard had decided that it would be amusing to dress him up like the court jester.

"That was an *awful* lot of blood," Reinhard agreed.

"I didn't even know humans *had* that much blood," Subaru said. He covered his mouth with the back of his hand and retched. "Reinhard? Do you mind if we talk about something else? I feel like I might throw up if I keep thinking about this."

"Yes, of course," Reinhard said with a smile.

"OK, I'm going to get changed," Subaru said.

Reinhard simply nodded.

After a moment of hesitation Subaru stripped off his rather large and billowy night gown.

Is it rude to undress in front of someone in this world? I was pretty badly injured so maybe he's just staying here in case I need help. Reinhard isn't acting awkward so guess it's no big deal. Then again my opinion of Reinhard is that he might not complain if someone lit him on fire. Jeez, I hope by getting naked in front of him I'm not propositioning the poor guy!

"So, can you explain what's up with this insignia?" Subaru asked, pulling on his new pants.

"Of course," Reinhard said. "However, in order to explain this some background information about the country might be necessary. Tell me how much do you know about the Dragon Kingdom of Lagunica?"

Subaru thought about it as he pulled his shirt over his head. "As of hearing your previous statement, I now know that it is called 'The Dragon Kingdom of Lagunica.'"

Reinhard stared at him.

Subaru shrugged with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, buddy. I'm not trying to be disrespectful to your country, although that's probably unavoidable at this point, but I have literally no idea where I am. I got here yesterday- or well, whatever day we met, and I have no idea where I am or how I got here. You're going to think that I'm completely insane but the truth is, I'm from another world altogether."

Reinhard stared at him open mouthed for a long moment. "Extraordinary," He murmured. "You're not lying."

Subaru frowned. "Really? I mean, don't get me wrong I'm truly grateful you believe me but mind telling me what I said that convinced you?"

Reinhard smile. "I bear the Divine Blessing of Wind Indication. I always know when someone lies to me."

"Oh!" Subaru said. "That's impressive. Must be pretty useful," Subaru thought for a moment. "Reinhard, you called it a 'Divine Blessing,' is that anything like magic?"

Reinhard nodded. "They are not unrelated. A Divine Blessing is a gift from the world, a rare benediction that grants the user unusual abilities."

"Hm," Subaru said thoughtfully. "Have you ever heard of a Divine Blessing called *Reason and Judgment*?" Subaru asked.

"I'm afraid I have not," Reinhard answered. "But there are countless Divine Blessings that I may have never heard of."

"What about *Indomitable*?"

"No," Reinhard shook his head. "Might I ask where you heard these names?"

"Oh, I just thought I might have blessings by those names," Subaru said with an awkward laugh. "Silly idea I guess. I'm not even from around here."

Reinhard's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Perhaps I could offer you some assistance. I possess the Divine Blessing of Judgment."

"I thought you had Wind Direction?" Subaru replied.

"Wind Indication," Reinhard corrected mildly. "However I am... somewhat unusual in the matter that I possess many Divine Blessings."

"Oh cool," Subaru said looking impressed. "That happens?"

Reinhard nodded. "From time to time," He said a bit awkwardly. "Anyway, the Blessing of Judgment allows me perceive the powers and abilities of anyone I wish. I would never dream of using it on anyone without permission or provocation."

Why does Reinhard sound uncomfortable saying that?

"But if you wish it, I would be only too happy to investigate what powers you might possess," Reinhard finished.

"Sure, that sounds great! Go ahead," Subaru said.

Reinhard nodded and narrowed his eyes at Subaru calling upon the Blessing of Judgment.

Reinhard frowned. The Blessing was working no better than before. It could tell him nothing about the applications and functions of Subaru's magic. However, it did tell him one thing: the great dark pool of potency that he sensed at the heart of Subaru Natsuki had been awakened. He wasn't sure how or why but something was moving in the depths. The previously placid pool was writhing with suppressed energy.

Concerning, Reinhard thought stepping back. *What is this magic? I have never sensed anything like it. Why does Subaru possess such dark power? Is his appearance merely a disguise, could he be evil masquerading in a kindly form? My Blessing of Empathy showed no foul intent. Could my Blessing have been deceived somehow? Perhaps. But if Subaru is truly evil than why did he show such courage on behalf of Lady Emilia last night? Why did he demonstrate such kindness and generosity to the slum girl and her guardian? What was there to gain? Was it all an act simply to cozen me? For what purpose would that serve? And even if his actions were intended to deceive me then where should such a thought lead me? It is well known that evil men deceive with their words. However even if a man could lie with his actions how would you ever prove it? If you choose to do good then what else could you be except good?*

Reinhard shook his head. His mind was leading him in circles: A very unusual experience for the rational and pragmatic Reinhard.

"Reinhard?" Subaru asked.

Reinhard jumped. "Oh! Forgive me, my mind wandered," He apologized.

"Oh, no worries, Red. My mind wanders too. I usually feel like I'm just along for the ride," Subaru laughed.

"Red?" Reinhard asked in surprise.

Subaru looked a bit awkward. "Yeah, it's a nickname. They're something I give them to people I like, sort of as a sign of friendship. Do you not like Red? I mean, I don't have to call you-"

"No!" Reinhard exclaimed. "No, I do enjoy red. It's my favorite color in fact," Reinhard hesitated, "Lord Subaru, do you... do you truly consider us friends?"

Subaru's eyes widened in surprise. "Well, of course I do! I mean," Subaru paused. "I mean, I like you very much. I don't know how you feel about *me* but you did save my life. I'm not sure if that makes me your friend but it certainly makes you mine."

Reinhard's eyes became rather watery. "Thank you," Reinhard said, turning away and wiping his eyes.

Subaru pretended not to notice his friend having a moment.

Damn, this guy must be really lonely if that kind of comment got him all weepy. I just want to give the poor guy a hug but I'm worried that will just make the dude cry more! I should keep an eye on him. I mean he seems like a super nice guy and I'd probably have wanted to hang out with him anyway but this man is clearly desperate for a little empathy and affection. I should be sure to provide some.

Subaru cleared his throat. "So did you find any blessings?"

"Oh," Reinhard shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. As far as I can tell you have no Blessings of any kind," He hesitated. "I did notice that you have a vast amount of magical power however," Reinhard ventured.

"Really?" Subaru asked. "You mean like I could learn to cast spells?"

Reinhard cocked his head. "Possibly," He admitted. "I'm actually not really familiar with your... sort of magical power and I don't know how it functions. I have never encountered it before. Does magic in your... world function differently than here?"

Subaru shrugged. "There is no magic in my world."

"Excuse me?!"

"You're excused," Subaru joked. "But it's true. There is no magic in my world. None at all."

Reinhard gaped. *There is no magic in his world? What does that even mean? Could he be lying, perhaps in some way that my Blessing could not detect? But if so... why? What purpose would it serve to mislead me on this point? It would seem to make no difference whatsoever if I chose to believe it or not; thus, I should at least provisionally accept it as true. But if so, then what kind of world could Subaru be from? I can not even imagine such a place. I could envision a world that is completely covered by ocean and no landmasses peek out of the waves. I could picture a world shrouded in thick mist so that the sun never shines. I can easily imagine a world where there are no people of any sort. But a world devoid of magic? How could this be? Magic is a blessing, a bountiful gift offered freely from the soul of a vibrant living world.*

Subaru saw that Reinhard was struggling with this concept and decided to sit quietly and give him plenty of time to think it through.

What manner of world could Lord Suburu come from? Could his world be dead in some strange way? Is his magic power so dark and foreboding because it was nurtured on the corpse soil of a decaying world? And how and why did he come here?

"Astounding," Reinhard said finally.

"If it makes you feel any better, I was pretty astounded when I found out this world had any magic at all," Subaru commented.

Reinhard frowned. *That is an interesting thought. Imagine if I found myself transported to another world. What if there was an immense power called 'the Power' that was granted by the Gods in that world? How would I react there having complete ignorance of such a fundamental aspect of the world? How would my Divine Blessings be perceived in a world that lacked such magic? Might they not be viewed as alien and dangerous? Could I not be perceived as a threat in spite of behaving honorably?*

For Reinhard, this type of musing showed an astounding amount of imagination. *We are all predisposed to view that which is alien to us as dark and threatening. I must think carefully before passing any such judgment on Subaru.*

"You must find this all most confusing," Reinhard said sympathetically.

"Yup, a little bit," Subaru admitted. "But getting back to the insignia, could you tell me what these things are all about? And as we established I know virtually nothing about this world so please treat me like an idiot," Subaru said with a laugh.

Reinhard paused as a thought occurred to him. "And what do you know about the Witch of Envy?" He asked.

"Never heard of her," Subaru replied. "As far as I know I haven't met any witches."

Reinhard nodded. This was why he'd used the name 'Satella' so lightly, although it did beg the question of why Lady Emilia had told him that was her name. "The Witch of Envy is considered to be the most terrible monster in the history of this world. She covered the planet in shadows and consumed half the world."

Subaru whistled. "Sounds like a nasty piece of work."

Reinhard nodded. "She was ultimately captured and sealed away by great heroes four hundred years ago. One of them being the dragon Volcanica. Since that time the dragon has entered into a pact with the royalty of this land. He vowed to protect and guide our land for all eternity."

"That was nice of him," Subaru commented.

"Yes but the covenant with the dragon is jeopardized because the royal family has recently died out," Reinhard continued.

Subaru's eyes widened. "What? The whole family?"

Reinhard nodded. "They were stricken with a strange plague that seemed to afflict no one but the royals themselves. The royal physicians did their best but they were helpless to save them."

Subaru's eyes narrowed. "So there was a deadly disease that only kills a single family?"

Reinhard nodded. "I share your skepticism but there was never any evidence unearthed suggesting that they were poisoned or that the plague was of unnatural origin. Regardless of how it occurred, they all died and now the state of the pact with the dragon is unclear. However, there is a prophecy written that a Dragon Priestess could form a new pact with the dragon. Thus the country is engaged in a process by which to select a new Dragon Priestess to make the pact and crown them king."

"OK, I'm with you so far," Subaru nodded.

"Did you notice how the gem in the insignia glowed when you picked it up, Lord Subaru?" Reinhard asked.

Subaru picked it up off the bed and saw that the gem did indeed glow.

"Yes," Subaru said. "I mean, now that you've *mentioned* it I've noticed," He said with a chuckle.

"I saw the Lady Emilia's insignia glow in your hand at the loot house last night. This told me that you were worthy to carry an insignia," Reinhard explained.

Subaru cocked his head. "OK, neat, but I'm still not sure I understand what this insignia means."

"The insignia glows only if it is held by someone with the qualifications to reforge the pact with the great Dragon," Reinhard said. "Someone with the right to be chosen as King."

Subaru stared at Reinhard for a long moment. "You're not serious," Subaru shook his head.

"I assure you, I am entirely serious," Reinhard replied.

"I thought you said that the dragon priestess was the only one who could make the pact with the dragon," Subaru said.

"So I had always thought. All those who have served the dragon have been female but when I investigated more closely it appears the actual word in the ancient texts which we usually translate as 'priestess' actually has no assigned gender. The glowing insignia is proof on its own. You are entitled to stand for election as Lagunica's 42nd King."

Subaru stared at Reinhard for a moment and then rolled his eyes heavenward.

Hey, God, you up there? Great. It's me, Subaru. Remember? I'm that guy you bounced from world to world the other day? Hey God, how you been?

Say could we have a quick chat? So the other day I was convinced that I was the chosen one come to lead the people to freedom and then I got filleted like a fish in a rundown tavern. Now they're telling me that I can be elected king. What I'm trying to say here, God, is that you're sending me some seriously mixed messages. What's the goal here? Do you just really like it when I make an ass of myself? That's it, isn't it? Great. Good to be on the same page, God.

Subaru shook his head.

How could I possibly rule over this country? I learned its name five minutes ago! Do I have to stand for election? If this is fulfilling some kind of weird prophecy, would they even let me back out? Would I have to run whether I like it or not? Do overly popular candidates commonly get 'sick' and die during the election? And how does this election work? Is there campaigning and making speeches? Is it whoever kills the most foes gets the crown?

God, I'm freaking out here! I almost died last night, I can't deal with this right now!

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and was flooded with a sense of calm confidence.

On second thought, maybe this really isn't such a bad idea, Subaru thought to himself. Think about it. You are from an advanced culture, both socially and technologically. You were never the most attentive student of social studies but you know what worked and what failed on Earth over the past few centuries. Earth is centuries, maybe thousands of years more advanced than Lagunica and all that knowledge is yours. Even simple tricks and innovations that are household knowledge back home could revolutionize these people's lives.

Of course they would want you to be king. Who else could be more qualified to lead them to peace and prosperity than someone with literal knowledge of the future? Look at it another way: if you being in power could save lives, do you really have any right to refuse? This isn't about being power hungry or seeking your own glory. If you are the person most qualified to lead this nation, wouldn't it be selfish of you to deny yourself to these people?

You were brought to this world because you deserve it. Who else but you could be worthy to sit on the throne?

Subaru restarted time and pinched the bridge of his nose. The calm and confidence faded quickly but Subaru didn't panic. The *Reason and Judgment* version of Subaru had made some interesting points.

I mean, I guess it makes sense from a certain viewpoint but I'm not so sure about this. Me being King? That is a lot of responsibility and I have my doubts I could handle it. I barely know anything about this world as it is! It might be smarter to offer to work behind the throne or something. Maybe offer to advise the new king on technical innovations and start like that.

"The public announcement is in a few weeks. At that time you'll have to present the insignia and be considered or return it to them and announce that you will not be competing," Reinhard explained.

"So how does this thing work?" Subaru asked.

"It's an election. Whoever gets the most votes wins."

"Wow. People vote here?" Subaru asked.

"Of course. The nobility and the royal council in particular votes regularly on matters of import," Reinhard said.

Subaru closed his eyes for a moment. *What were you expecting, Subaru? Did you really think this place would be a democracy? Maybe the fact that they said they were electing a king should have clued you in!*

"So none of the merchant class or the folks in the slums get to vote?" Subaru asked.

"Some do. Voting is a privilege bestowed on a person and then passed on to their heirs."

Wouldn't that be an interesting platform: 'Elect me your ruler and I will grant universal suffrage so everyone can vote for their leaders which will ensure that I get kicked out of office within the first thirty days.' Wait a minute, why I am knocking this idea? Do a good thing that empowers most of the country to control their own fates and only be stuck in a position responsibility for a month? Sounds awesome!

"What are the campaigns like?" Subaru asked.

"Honestly, I'm not certain," Reinhard admitted. "Elections have been held for vacant lordships and the like in the past but nothing like this has happened in history. We've never had an election on this scale. Most likely the candidates will announce their plans for the future of Lagunica during the public announcement. After that, it will be question of who manages to put the most ideas into effect and provides the greatest improvement for the kingdom to secure support."

"Huh. Well that's one way to ensure that the wealthy and powerful stay that way," Subaru mused, looking down at the glowing insignia in his hand. "Make certain that they are most of the people who can vote and then set up a tournament where the ones likely to make the biggest splash are the ones already swimming in wealth and power."

Reinhard looked pained. "I regret to admit there is something to what you say," Reinhard coughed. "In any event, I wanted to inform you that I have been assigned as your knight for the time being," He paused. "Assuming that meets with your approval."

"Um," Subaru hesitated. "Red, I'm just going to be honest and say that I have absolutely no understanding of how feudal structures work. I don't know what it means to have a knight. So I'll turn that question back on you. I certainly enjoy your company and I'd love to hang around with you but if this is going to damage your reputation or simply doesn't benefit you in anyway, just say the word and I'll raise whatever objection you want me to. I already owe you an enormous debt and I'd hate to trespass on your kindness any further."

Reinhard's eyes widened. "This is not a concern, Lord Subaru, I assure you. I was assigned to your service but truthfully if I had not been, I would have volunteered. I was most impressed by your courage facing the Bowel Hunter. I was simply waiting to ensure no other knight desired the position. I thought it would be rude of me to claim it first."

Subaru glanced away thoughtfully for a moment.

"Well, it's going to be great to be working with you, Red!" Subaru said, clasping an astonished Reinhard's hand with affection. "Also, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could we knock off the 'Lord' business? At least while we're alone? I'd rather you address me as a friend, assuming you're willing to."

"Wouldn't that be disrespectful?" Reinhard asked dubiously.

Subaru laughed. "Trust me. Spend a day or two with me, you'll find plenty of reasons not to respect me. I'm just saving you some time," Subaru slipped the insignia into his pocket. "Do you know where I could find Tella-...Emilia? I'd like to talk to her."

"I could fetch a carriage to bring us there," Reinhard suggested.

Subaru grimaced. "That'd be great but if this is putting you through any trouble, I could just walk," Subaru offered.

Reinhard offered him a shy smile. "Truthfully, I'd advise against that. It's the better part of a day's journey by carriage."

"Wow," Subaru said, following Reinhard down the stairs. The building was enormous and completely clean. It reminded Subaru more of an office building than a home. A large grandfather clock sat on the landing. It appeared to be a show piece or a sign of wealth in this world.

Well, that tells me something about the level of technology around here. Then again, when you factor in that magic is in widespread use, it probably doesn't tell the full picture. Too bad I don't have more time to look at the clock. I loved gears when I was younger. I wore out several sets of Lego gears and Kinnex before I stopped being into it. That was something I was always good at. Huh. Maybe I could into business as a clock maker here? It might be good money and it would certainly be fun.

It was still very early in the day and the house servants were just beginning to roam the halls. "Is this really your house?"

"This is the Astrea Family's Manor in the capital. I live here when I'm not traveling or working as part of the guard," Reinhard explained.

"It's very nice," Subaru said.

Wait, do you actually compliment noble estates or is it just so accepted that the estate is going to be beautiful that it seems weird to call attention to it? Subaru mused. *I have no idea what constitutes proper behavior and good manners around here. That could be a problem. I really don't want to risk insulting someone by accident in a world were most people walk around armed with swords.*

"Thank you," Reinhard said with a smile. However the smile immediately fell off his face as an unshaven man with red hair approached them.

"Good morning, Reinhard," The man said with an unfriendly smile.

"Father," Reinhard replied with a slight bow.

These two are family? Subaru thought. *I mean I can totally see the resemblance but this fellow looks like a creep. Why is he sneering at his son like that? What could Reinhard have possibly done to make this man resent him so much?*

"I trust you are enjoying your new assignment," The father said, glancing at Subaru with a smirk.

"I am content. Thank you for assigning me to him," Reinhard replied distantly.

Subaru's gaze flickered back and forth. *Is there anything I can do? I feel like this guy is bullying Red, although I'm not really sure why. Should I distract the guy or something? No, I can't. I don't even know what's really going on here. If I go blundering in without thinking I'll just embarrass Red and make everything worse.*

Huh, Weird. I don't think I ever would have thought about it that way before. I would have just acted first and thought second. Maybe I am getting smarter.

"I do hope you'll manage to keep him from embarrassing you too much," The father snickered.

"I assure you, my embarrassment is of no concern," He replied.

"That's good to hear. You'll almost certainly be cleaning up after him for a few weeks," The father continued.

"It might well be longer," Reinhard replied distantly.

"Oh!" The father laughed, "Does he actually intent to join the selection? How marvelous! You could be required to be his devoted knight for years."

"A not unwelcome thought," Reinhard said.

The two continued talking. Actually it was more like sparring. The father's words cut like blades and Reinhard simply deflected them as best he could without ever going on the offensive.

Finally Subaru just couldn't take it anymore.

"Oh, Sir Reinhard! I believe that's our ride!" Subaru exclaimed, despite having no idea where a carriage would be parked or even which window to check. "We should go immediately, I'd hate to keep them waiting!" Subaru said as he grabbed Reinhard and hurried them both down the hallway, uncertain of which way he was going or where the exit was.

Reinhard followed where he was lead, seemingly indifferent to where they were going. "Thank you my... friend; for your gallant rescue," Reinhard said gloomily.

"Might have been gallant but it was also pretty clumsy. I'm sorry, Red. I didn't have a better plan for that situation," Subaru replied, finding that the hallway ended in a T joint and arbitrarily pulling Reinhard right.

"It served," Reinhard replied with a faint smile. "And if you're actually curious, the front door is back there." He pointed the other way.

Subaru sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Damn. For a second I actually thought I was going to find my way out of here."

"What are the odds right?" Subaru asked Reinhard in a jovial voice as the carriage pulled out. "I had no way of knowing the carriage was actually here. I must be lucky today."

Reinhard stared out the window with a moody expression on his face. "I apologize that you had to see that," Reinhard said after a moment. "It was churlish in the extreme for my father and I to..." He trailed off.

Subaru sigh. "Don't worry about it. I'm just sorry that you had to experience it. You two don't get along?"

Reinhard shook his head. "Not for a long time. Those problems... go back a long way."

"I'm sorry," Subaru said. He decided to change the subject. "So I hope this trip isn't keeping you away from anything important today."

Reinhard shook his head. "Actually, you managed to get me out of an engagement party," He said with a faint smile.

"Friends of yours?"

"No, it's just considered customary for a member of each of the great families to attend such affairs. Father does not do... well at such situations so I would have wound up going," Reinhard explained.

"Not a fun party I take it?" Subaru asked.

Reinhard actually laughed. "Why would you say that? I'm sure that watching the prospective bride and groom trade coy insults at each other in public would have been a delight."

"So... not a match made in heaven then?"

"Those two are the heads of their respective families and they have hated each other for decades," Reinhard told me. "The announcement of their engagement was hilarious to the entire kingdom."

"Um. Maybe this is a dumb question but if they really hate each other then why are they getting married?"

"They won't," Reinhard said.

"OK, now I'm confused," Subaru replied.

"It's not a terribly uncommon thing. You see in this world, marriage leads to the combination of assets and business interests under law."

"Yeah, it works the same way back home," Subaru said.

"However, unlike in the other nations, in Lagunica an engagement puts the couple in a sort of 'gray' area where assets and interests can be temporarily combined. The ostensible bride and groom need to be considered one entity under law for the next year or so in order to facilitate some very complicated business dealings that I won't bore you with. Once this is done they will dissolve the engagement and separate. Because these two hate each other with an unholy passion, the other great families are finding the situation extremely entertaining."

"Huh," Subaru said, not sure he understood this. He decided to shift to something more relevant. "Hey, Red, do you know anything about this Roswaal fellow?"

"A bit," Reinhard said. "He is considered the greatest mage in the kingdom. He serves as an adviser to the royal family and the Sages' council."

"Do you think if we approached him right he'd give us hospitality for a few days?"

Reinhard cocked his head. "I'm... certain he would but why?"

Subaru shrugged. "Two reasons: Number one, I really like being near Emilia. That's very important to me. And number two, you may recall that you saved my life. Repeatedly. The very least I can do is give you an excuse to stay out of your house and out of your father's way for a few days."

Reinhard stared at Subaru in astonishment and then he started to laugh.

"So, you like that plan? I thought it was pretty clever," Subaru said over Reinhard's laughter.

Reinhard managed to get control of his laughter. "A very clever idea. Unfortunately, I can't be away from the estate very long. My father is head of the royal guard and he requires regular service from all of us."

"But you won't be able to," Subaru shrugged.

"Pardon me?"

"Red, think about it. You are the assigned knight to a savage from beyond this world," Subaru said in mock horror. "He has had no contact with civilized people and can barely speak a civilized language. He simply must be kept under constant vigilance or who knows what might happen? He might go swimming in the drinking fountain or expose his buttocks to a Duchess or try to kiss a troll."

Reinhard burst out laughing again.

"If you need excuses to stay away, I'll give you all the excuses you need. It won't be hard to convince folks that I'm socially incompetent. I'd probably convince them of that by accident anyway!" Subaru shrugged.

"Very kind of you, Lord Subaru," Reinhard said with a broad smile. "Sadly, I'm not sure this is the behavior expected of a knight."

"Which is why I'm volunteering to do it," Subaru said self-importantly. "I may, debatably, be a lord but I am certainly no knight. Leave it to me, Red. I'm certain I can come up with enough baffling situations to require you babysitting me somewhere a long way from the estate; at least up until the selection gets started."

Reinhard shook his head in amusement. "Well then, what can I say, Lord Subaru, but that I am deeply in your debt. Thank you, Lor-" He paused. "Thank you, Subaru," He finished with a smile.

One of the reasons that the trip out to wherever Emilia lived took so long was because the earth dragons needed to be rested every two hours. Luckily, Reinhard had thought ahead and packed them sandwiches and some wine. During one rest stop near a bubbling river, Reinhard was providing directions to a group of traveling merchants who appeared to be lost.

Subaru had nothing to add to the conversation so he wandered over to the river.

Let's play with that ability some more: Indomitable. What exactly does it do? It seemed to stop Elsa from slicing me in half, or at least it did while it was still on but how does it work?

Subaru tried to activate it and felt the same old tingle that ended in a spasm of horrible pain.

OK, that does not feel good! Subaru gasped as he doubled over clutching his chest. So how does this work? A short period of undefined magical power and then searing pain? That's not very useful.

Subaru kept experimenting until he discovered that he could only sustain *Indomitable* for about five seconds. Any

longer than that produced terrible convulsions in his heart. With a little more practice he started to sense when it was ready to be triggered. Essentially it was 5 seconds on and then a thirty second recharge before he could use it again.

OK, cool. So now that I understand that, what does this ability actually do?

Subaru remember how Elsa's blades had failed to even scratch him. He reached down to the ground and picked up a sharp rock. He triggered *Indomitable* then smashed the rock into his head as hard as he could.

The rock broke into pieces and Subaru didn't feel a thing.

Then Subaru sighed. *Nice work, Subaru. Once again you demonstrate the 'act first, think later' kind of behavior that always makes you such a delight. Take a brief moment and imagine how much pain you would be in if you had guessed wrong about how that magic worked.*

Subaru shook his head in bemusement.

So I guess this trick make me invulnerable, or nearly so, but only for five seconds? That's pretty neat. I mean, it's a really short window but it could be really powerful if I use it right. The thirty second cooldown is going to suck though.

I wonder if Indomitable makes me any stronger? I mean if I'm much more durable, does that mean that my hitting something would cause more damage? Does that make sense? Man, I wish I stayed awake in physics.

Subaru knelt down on a large boulder growing out of the earth that he and Reinhard had eaten their sandwiches on. He triggered *Indomitable* and then drove his fist into the stone as hard as he could. The top part of the boulder shattered into pieces.

"Huh. That's pretty cool," Subaru said, brushing the gravel off his clothes.

"Subaru," Reinhard called in a wary voice as he wandered over. "The carriage is set to depart if you're ready."

"Awesome," Subaru said, standing up.

Reinhard was looking at the shattered boulder with wide eyes. "Subaru, how did you do this?"

Subaru scratched his chin. "Well, I was fooling around and it just kind of happened," Subaru shrugged. "My father always told me I had one hell of a left hook."

Back in the carriage, Subaru was staring out the window watching the scenery drift by. Reinhard found himself trying to stare at Subaru while not being obvious about it. Subaru hadn't realized that Reinhard had finished giving the travelers directions and had come looking for him in time to watch Subaru play with his magic.

He shattered that boulder with his bare hand. That boulder was enormous. I certainly could have shattered it but I doubt Julius or Felix could have. So... what? That puts Subaru's power level somewhere between myself and Julius?

No it doesn't mean that at all. It means that he's more powerful than Julius and that's it. He might be far weaker than me. On the other hand, could he be as strong as me? Could he even be stronger?

"Red?" Subaru asked, looking out the window.

"Yes?"

"You've been staring at me for the past seven miles. Something on your mind?"

Reinhard flushed and didn't answer.

Subaru shrugged. "If you want to say something, say it. I'm not going to bite your head off."

Reinhard was silent for a moment. *Should I simply ask him about his intentions and powers? Would that serve to tip my hand? I am not well equipped to play these types of mind games.*

"Lord Subaru," Reinhard began.

"Lord?" Subaru echoed, turning away from the window to give Reinhard his full attention. "Oh man. You *really* don't think I'm going to like what you're about to tell me, do you?"

Reinhard clenched his jaw for a moment. "Subaru, where did your magic come from?"

Subaru shrugged. "Search me, I didn't have any back home. I came to this world and presto: special abilities."

He's telling the truth, Reinhard thought using his Blessing. Whatever strange powers he possesses they only manifested here. Could they be a gift of this world? And if so, why would the world grant him something monstrous like that dark pool of unfathomable potential? And why him? "What are these abilities?"

Subaru shifted a bit uncomfortably. "I'm still trying to figure that out. They seem a little weird. A little unpredictable."

Evasive but not technically a lie, Reinhard thought.

"Hey, is that a village?" Subaru asked.

Reinhard glanced out of the carriage. "Arlem," Reinhard replied. "It's the closest village to Lord Roswaal's manor. We're just a stone's throw away."

"Do you think we could stop there for a few minutes?"

"We certainly could but why?" Reinhard asked.

Subaru shrugged. "I'd just like to see what the people are like out in the country."

They stopped for more than a few minutes. Subaru and Reinhard had spent more than an hour in the village. Reinhard had been fawned over by the village chief and Subaru spent most of his time being swarmed by the village children, especially the two girls. The boys had been fascinated by the legendary Sword Saint and asked over and over again if he could show them his Dragon Sword. He regretfully informed them that the sword could only be drawn against worthy foes and thus he couldn't show it to them.

You'd think that Reinhard distracting all the boys would have made Subaru's life easier but this simply made Petra and Meili redouble their efforts to chase him down and climb all over him.

None of the villagers showed much interest in who Subaru was and Subaru didn't volunteer anything. In fact the Village Chief was fairly dismissive toward Subaru, clearly taking him as some kind of misbehaved servant, a conclusion Subaru received with good grace and obvious amusement. This disrespect annoyed Reinhard but if Subaru didn't object, his knight had no right to.

Thus it was mid afternoon before they arrived at Lord Roswaal's manor.

"Why don't I let you do the talking?" Subaru said with a smile as they climbed out of the carriage. "I'd really rather not be executed for unintentional rudeness today."

Reinhard wasn't sure which part of that statement he should correct first but a greeter interrupted him before he could respond.

"Welcome to Lord Roswaal's manor, Sir Reinhard," A maid with pink hair said with a formal bow. "We are honored by your presence. Regretfully, Lord Roswaal has gone upon an excursion to assist a village located to the north and will not return before supper. We invite you to await his return inside."

"We are most grateful," Reinhard said with a formal bow. Reinhard noticed out of the corner of his eye that Subaru was copying him. *There's no reason for a Lord to bow before a maid*, Reinhard thought. *I'll need to give Subaru some instruction in basic courtesies before the public announcement of the selection.*

"Subaru!" A voice called.

Emilia came running down to the carriage with a big smile on her face. She flung her arms around him and caught him in a hug. "You're OK!" She exclaimed.

Emilia's eyes suddenly grew very wide and she quickly pulled away from Subaru to his obvious disappointment. "Forgive me, that was very rude," Emilia said calmly with a formal bow.

Subaru's smile never flickered. "I don't consider hugs rude. Do you, Sir Reinhard?"

"No, not at all," Reinhard agreed with amusement.

"Ah, so this is the man I've heard so much about," The pink haired maid said in a bored tone. "The brave hero who thought he could block a sword strike with his own organs."

Reinhard frowned at the maid. This kind of disrespectful commentary was close to crossing a line.

Subaru just shrugged. "I worked with what I had. I really wanted her to hit me in my head, my father always told me it was terribly hard and nothing could get through it, but she didn't go for that."

"Ram, stop it," Emilia said. "Subaru saved my life. He was very brave."

"Yes, miss," Ram said without a note of contrition.

Ram turned around and walked back up the stairs to the house. "Please, come this way," She said, not bothering to look back and see if anyone was following her.

"Hello there, Subaru!" Puck said, popping into existence as they entered the house.

To Subaru's surprise, Puck seemed genuinely happy to see him and even floated down into his hands so that Subaru could pet him.

"Hello there yourself, Puck!" Subaru said, stroking the magic cat's fur. "How have you been?"

"Oh, fine," Puck said, closing his eyes and enjoying the stroking. "Subaru, I'm really grateful for what you did for Lia. For a second, I was afraid she might get hurt. I owe you big time. I'm actually glad I didn't kill you."

Uh. How does one respond to that comment?

"Me too," Subaru said lamely.

"Hm. What are you doing touching Betty's Bubby, I suppose?" A tiny blond girl in an elaborate pink and white gothic-lolita costume demanded.

"Bubby?" Subaru asked in confusion.

"She means me, Subaru," Puck said calmly. "This is my sister Beatrice."

Subaru frowned. *Puck is a magical talking cat. His daughter is a half-elf and his sister is a... Whatever she is. I really want to get a look at this family tree!*

"Oh, it's a pleasure to meet you," Subaru said, extending his hand to the girl with a smile. "Any friend of Puck and Emilia is a friend of mine."

Beatrice flushed a bit but folded her arms across her chest. "It is now Betty's time with Bubby so you need to get your hands off, I suppose," She huffed.

Subaru glanced at Emilia to see how she felt about this but there was no sign she was affected by Beatrice's demands. In fact, aside from Subaru and Reinhard, no one seemed to find this unusual at all.

"Of course, I'd hate to come between siblings," Subaru said awkwardly as he gently handed Puck to Beatrice.

"Hello, Bubby!" Beatrice cooed, becoming a completely different person and scampering off cradling the magical cat. She ran into a nearby room, not bothering to shut the door.

Subaru walked over to the room and peaked inside. The room was full of books from floor to ceiling and had a small futon that Beatrice lay on while cradling and caressing Puck.

This is kind of surreal.

"Nice place you've got here," Subaru commented, looking around from just outside the library.

Beatrice stopped fawning over Puck and immediately got a sour look on her face. "What are you doing in here, I suppose? You are not invited into Betty's library."

"Well, Betty, if you don't close the door you can't really complain about people walking in. I'm just saying," Subaru replied.

Beatrice fumed. "You are not welcome in Beatrice's library, in fact!"

Beatrice waved her hand and a force like a great gust of wind pushed Subaru out of the library and slammed the door in his face.

What's with this kid? What did I do to deserve that?

Subaru walked right back to the door and flung it wide.

"Hey! What's the big-" Subaru began.

The room inside was an ordinary storage closet.

Subaru rubbed his head wondering if he was going crazy.

"Beatrice is a Great Spirit like Puck, Subaru," Emilia explained from just behind him. "She can make her library appear inside any of the doors in the manor. When she changes her location no one can find her again until she wants them to."

"Can she now?" Subaru said with a smirk. He had an idea.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

The world froze around him and Subaru quickly scanned all the doors in the hallway.

No one can find her, huh? Sounds like maybe you should test that theory, Subaru thought. They've never seen anything like you. This seems like a fine time to demonstrate your capabilities. It's another chance to impress Emilia. Besides, it would be a shame for Ram and Reinhard to think you're just some guy after all.

Most of the doors seemed completely normal but one door was being pressed against its door frame; a small change that would have been completely undetectable by the naked eye. It suggested that something inside was putting pressure on that door.

Subaru restarted time and smiled, marching over to that door.

Ram looked annoyed. "What are you-?"

"Hello!" Subaru shouted, flinging the door open wide.

"Wah!" Beatrice cried, leaping off the futon in shock.

"Wow, Subaru. It's really impressive that you could find Betty's library again so quickly," Puck complimented.

"Thanks, Puck!" Subaru said, his good humor restored.

I feel awesome. I still have all the confidence from Reason and Judgment. It's lasting a while this time. Wish I could bottle the stuff.

"How did you find Betty's library in fact?" Beatrice demanded, staring at Subaru.

"Oh, probably just dumb luck," Subaru dismissed, leaning casually against the door frame. "So Beako, can I call you Beako? Great. I feel like we got off on the wrong foot here. How about we try being friends?"

Beatrice gaped at him, completely at a loss for words. Then her face turned bright red and Subaru had a mental image of steam pouring out of the little girl's ears. "Get out of my library!" She commanded, magically slamming the door shut in Subaru's face with a sound like thunder.

Subaru shook his head as the magical confidence faded.

Subaru inspected the slammed door. He was left with the uncomfortable impression that if his hand had been just a *little* bit further into the door frame, that door slam might have amputated a few fingers. He wasn't sure if Beatrice had moved her library again but Subaru thought that maybe he had tempted fate enough for one day.

Subaru looked behind him. Emilia and Reinhard looked shocked and even Ram seemed like she might be slightly impressed.

This made Subaru happy.

"So, shall we go?" Subaru asked.

"I really wanted to thank you, Subaru. You saved my life and recovered my insignia. I can't thank you enough," Emilia said as the two of them walked in the gardens.

Dinner wouldn't be ready for some time so Ram had suggested that Emilia show Subaru around.

Reinhard was being 'entertained' by Ram.

"Oh, anything for you, *Tella*," Subaru said, somewhere between amusement and annoyance.

Emilia flushed. "I'm... sorry about that," She said.

Puck, appearing out of nowhere, said: "Honestly, I don't know why you told him that in the first place, Lia."

"Me neither! What was the point of giving me a fake name?" Subaru asked. "I'm very deeply offended. I demand a reintroduction."

"You... what?" Emilia asked.

"I want to do it again," Subaru said firmly. He extended his hand. "My name is Subaru Natsuki."

Emilia looked at him in confusion then slowly took his hand. "My name is Emilia. Just Emilia."

"Great! Now that we've been formally introduced, we can move on," Subaru said with a smile.

Subaru resumed his walk more than a little amused by Emilia's baffled expression.

"Subaru, you're a good guy but you're also really really weird," Puck observed.

Subaru shushed him. "That's supposed to be a secret," He said with a wink.

Emilia laughed.

"So how did you get away from Beatrice?" Subaru asked Puck.

The cat shrugged in mid air. "I just told her that Lia needed a chaperon. She was in a pretty bad mood after you located her library in seconds anyway."

"Hm. Maybe I should have thought it through a little more before I pulled that stunt," Subaru mused.

He turned back to Emilia. "So Reinhard tells me you're trying to become the ruler of the country. I had no idea that I was spending the day running around town with a princess," Subaru said.

Emilia flushed and shook her head. "I'm not a princess. I grew up in the Elier forest. I only left the forest this year when Lord Roswaal found me and discovered that I was qualified to stand for election."

"So what, you woke up one morning and decided you wanted your own country?" Subaru asked with a chuckle. He debated telling her about his own insignia, then decided against it.

There's no point in my bringing the insignia up. I have absolutely no chance of being elected so there's no point in even taking it seriously. Telling Emilia about the insignia would simply make her wonder if we have to be enemies for no good reason.

Emilia walked in silence for a moment.

Subaru glanced at Emilia who wore a very somber look. Puck floated wordlessly behind Emilia looking concerned.

Subaru decided to change the subject. "Do you have a lot of friends and family in the forest?"

If anything, this question made Emilia looked even glummer and she shook her head. "No. That's why I need to become King," She said in a quiet voice.

"To make friends?" Subaru asked in confusion.

Emilia just walked on in silence.

The moment dragged on for some time. "So... why do you want to become King?" Subaru asked.

Emilia hesitated before replying. "It's really very selfish," She said with a shake of her head.

"I bet I can handle it," Subaru replied. "I can be pretty selfish at times myself."

Subaru noticed Puck out of the corner of his eye. The flying cat had his paws folded across his chest and he was looking at Subaru with a sour expression. Puck might have forgiven him for his lustful, possessive fantasies toward Emilia the other day but the magic cat clearly hadn't forgotten them.

Emilia stopped walking and seemed to mull it over for a moment. Finally she answered: "My people are cursed," She said in a whisper.

"What?"

"The elves of the forest were caught in some kind of...disaster. I was the only survivor," Emilia explained.

Subaru frowned and noticed that Puck seemed to be looking away awkwardly.

"The elves are all frozen solid, living statues in the forest. I need to become King so that I can acquire the sacred Dragon's Blood. Roswaal assures me that it can heal them but only the King has access to it."

"That's awful!" Subaru exclaimed.

Emilia nodded sadly. "I took care of their statues for years. Tending to them day after day. I'd do anything to free them. So you see, I'm really only doing this to get the blood. I sometimes feel like I should be disqualified from the selection for being selfish alone."

Subaru nodded, slowly thinking the matter through carefully.

"Um, Emilia? Where does the selfish part in this story come in?" Subaru asked.

Emilia blinked. "I just told you-"

"You told me that you want to save a large group of people, most of these people, I can assume, are not you. How is that selfish?" Subaru asked.

Emilia flushed. "They're my people! They're my family," She retorted angrily.

"And that makes you selfish?" Subaru asked skeptically. "If I did something nice for my mother, am I just being greedy because the person I'm making happy is someone I know? How far does that go? Does that theory of selfish behavior apply to my entire species or just my immediate family?" Subaru squinted at the sky as if deep in thought. "Let's take Felt the other day. Now, I gave her a bag of gold coins so she and Rom could get out of the slums. At the time I thought I was just being nice but maybe I'm actually being selfish. I mean, Felt is a member of my race, or I assume she is at least; those red eyes of hers are kind of freaky but she looks human. So maybe instead of being nice to Felt I was actually just trying to benefit a member of my own race: you know, make sure humans stay on top and keep the elves down!"

Emilia looked hopelessly confused by Subaru's impromptu speech.

"Oh, wait! It's even worse than that!" Subaru exclaimed in mock horror. "I also consider Felt a person who could be a friend! So not only am I trying to help a member of my own race but it's someone I feel a connection to! I'm a monster!" He gasped.

Emilia's mouth was moving but no sound came out. Puck just looked flabbergasted.

"Emilia!" Subaru said desperately, throwing himself at her feet and grabbing her hands. "It's hopeless. I can't control my selfishness. Please, lock me up in some dark hole someplace before I try to help again!"

The garden was dead silent except for a bird calling.

"Subaru, you dummy!" Emilia said, her face was bright red and she was clearly annoyed. She threw off his hands and pushed him away. "Get up! What are you doing?!"

Subaru smoothly got to his feet. "I was just giving you some perspective on how dumb your little 'I'm really very selfish' speech actually was. It sounds really stupid, right?" He said casually.

Emilia shook her head violently. "Subaru! It's not the same thing at all! I'm...", Emilia trailed off and turned away.

Subaru scratched his chin for a moment then smirked.

"Emilia, you told me I saved your life the other day. It seems to me like you owe me an enormous debt," Subaru mused.

Emilia turned to look at him and shifted uncomfortably. Puck's gaze was cold on Subaru. "Yes, that's true," She admitted. "I owe you everything."

"Then it seems only fair that you do something for me," Subaru replied.

Emilia considered that and then drew herself up straight. "Yes. I'll do whatever you want, Subaru," Emilia agreed firmly.

Subaru sensed that a nearby magical talking cat was thinking seriously about ending his life right now.

"I have an important mission that means a lot to me and I want your help carrying it out," Subaru said.

Emilia's face set in determination. "Of course. I'll help you in whatever way I can," She agreed.

"Great. So apparently there are a group of elves suffering under a terrible curse. They've been frozen solid," Subaru explained.

Emilia blinked.

"I'm determined to find a way to save them, come hell or high water, and *you* are going to help me do it," He said firmly.

Emilia's face was rapidly shifting from baffled to annoyed.

"I don't really have any solid plans right now, but someone I trust told me that maybe Dragon blood would-"

"Subaru!" Emilia exploded. "What are you talking about, you dummy?!"

"I want to cure the elves in the Elior forest. I thought I was being pretty clear about that," He answered.

"Why are you asking me to help you cure *my* people?!"

"Ah," Subaru said, raising a finger like a professor about to make a point. "But according to your rules, if I'm trying to save your people, whom I've never met by the way, I am not being selfish. And if you are doing it because I'm forcing you to repay a debt to me, then you're not being selfish either. Important distinction."

Emilia just stared at him.

Subaru sensed that the time for kidding around was over and he stepped closer to her. "We are going to cure them. I promise. Whatever the road, wherever it takes us. We will find a way. I'll help you save your people or I'll die trying," Subaru said seriously, extending his hand.

Huh. It's weird but I really mean what I'm saying. I genuinely want to help her. Not just because it might make Emilia like me better, I want to do it because it might make me like me better. I want to do things. I want to help. The truth is I always hated the loser I was back home; the joke that nobody expected anything from. I was terrified of the world, unwilling to try to do anything and completely dependent on my parents. I have a chance to reinvent myself here and I don't want to screw it up. I may not be a hero but I can at least be someone that other people can respect.

Emilia stared at Subaru's hand as if she had no idea what it was. Her eyes appeared very watery. "Subaru, why?"

"Why, what?" He shrugged.

"Why are you trying to help my people?" She murmured.

Subaru flushed a little. He didn't want to get into detail about his motivations, so he sidestepped. "I'm not trying to help your people," He said with a smile. "I'm trying to help *you*. See, Emilia, unlike you I am very very selfish. And I simply can't stand to see the people I care about cry. And I bet that if I heal your people, you're going to want to smile a lot. Therefore, I want to be there to see your smiles. Make sense?"

Emilia laughed and her tears started to fall.

Subaru started to hug her then thought better of it and just stood next to her and held her hands in his own until she stopped laughing and crying. Then the two resumed their walk through the garden.

Puck sighed from behind them. "Really, Subaru? You couldn't just say 'I want to help you?' You had to go through that ridiculous practical joke first?"

Subaru laughed.

"So, Subaru, where do you come from?" Emilia asked.

Subaru hid a smirk. "Oh, I come from another world," He said casually.

There was a momentary silence.

"Wait. *What?!*" Puck and Emilia said together.

"Sooo it is simply wonderful to meet you, young Subaru," Lord Roswaal intoned over a cup of tea. "I am most relieved by your recovery."

Subaru, who sat at the table between Reinhard and Emilia, was struggling to keep the incredulous look off his face. Why would a lord dress like a cross between a clown and a reject from Alice in Wonderland. The only reason Subaru hadn't taken him as the court jester was because Reinhard had deliberately interrupted Subaru and referred to him as Lord Roswaal in order to warn him.

Puck had gone off in the arms of Beatrice again.

Ram and a blue haired girl, who looked so much like her that they could only be twins, stood attentively nearby.

"We are all sooo grateful for everything you did for Lady Emilia," Roswaal continued. "You managed to saaave her insignia and her life as well. You are truly a hero, young Subaru."

"Oh, no big deal, I just wanted to help," Subaru said awkwardly. Emilia was smiling at him and he couldn't quite stop blushing.

"And now I discover that yooou yourself are a candidate for the throne," Roswaal continued.

"Really?" Emilia gasped.

Subaru flushed. "Oh. Did I forget to mention that?"

Emilia just stared at him in shock.

Subaru laughed awkwardly. "Well, I'm not really taking it all that seriously. I don't know anything about ruling a country," Subaru shrugged. "I've probably just been nominated to give the nobility a good laugh."

Emilia looked almost stricken. "Does this mean that we're rivals now?" She asked sadly.

"Nah. I promised to help you, remember? I'm sure we can form an alliance or something."

"Oooh don't worry about your rivalry. That will mooost unfortunately not be a problem," Roswaal interjected.

Subaru blinked. "Um, why would it be unfortunate that we won't be rivals?"

"Because I'm afraid that the Lady Emilia's candidacy has come into sharp question. She allowed her insignia to be handled by someone outside of her own faction. This is grounds for disqualification. By magical means the insignias announce to the Sages' Council when they have been handled by anyone other than their designated owner. They will certainly be sending someone to investigate and confiscate the insignia shortly."

Emilia's face twisted in horror and she looked on the brink of tears.

"Wait, you mean Felt?" Subaru asked. "Well, why don't you just... *announce* that you had recruited her to your faction before she touched the insignia," Subaru gave Emilia a meaningful glance as he tried to avoid saying anything that would suggest he was making this up. "I'm sure Felt... *was* amendable."

"I had actually considered that but I'm afraid it woould be futile," Roswaal replied. "Unfortunately, the Sages' Council is also aware that you touched the insignia and as someone who holds an insignia, you can not be recruited to another faction."

"Nor," Roswaal continued as Subaru opened his mouth to speak, "Are you permitted to give up your own insignia until the selection is announced publicly. I'm afraid there is nothing to be done."

"We just talked about forming an alliance-" Subaru said.

"I'm afraid that no mere alliance will solve this matter," Roswaal continued. "Even under an alliance your interests still remain separate and adverse. You can not unify your camps by a mere alliance."

Emilia was crying silently but she also gave Subaru a weak smile. "Thank you for trying, Subaru," She whispered.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and the scene around him froze.

Hmm. You know, you're far more intelligent in the frozen moment than in the normal world, Subaru mused to himself. You ought to come in here more often. Insolvable problems outside resolve to almost ludicrously simple solutions inside. Best of all the perfect strategy for this situation advances both Emilia's objectives and your own. The conflict of interest might almost be guilt inducing if it were not the perfect solution to serve all needs.

Subaru restarted time and his enhanced confidence rapidly faded away.

Subaru immediately began to doubt his plan.

This is a crazy idea. This is both stupid and crazy. It probably won't even work and Emilia might slap you in the face for even suggesting it, but-

Subaru drummed his fingers on the table. "Emilia," He began slowly. "Do you remember when you told me you'd do anything to cure your people?"

Emilia nodded through a snuffle.

"Emilia," Subaru began, speaking with an exaggerated care. He took her hand under the table. "I know that we didn't plan to announce the agreement we made *the other day* so soon, but I think that may be our only option at this point."

Emilia cocked her head. "What agree- ow!"

Subaru squeezed her hand, hard.

Emilia looked at him in confusion.

"I know that this isn't the way we planned to announce it," Subaru said, looking Emilia in the eye and emphasizing every word. "But I think that telling them now is the only way to keep you in the selection."

Emilia's eyes widened and then flickered around the room.

Emilia slowly nodded. "If you truly believe that is for the best," She said slowly.

Oh God, this woman lies like she's reading off a TelePrompter. She wants to be a politician? The nation is doomed.

Reinhard looked at Subaru closely, clearly wanting to help but having no idea what was going on. Roswaal sipped his tea, looking bored.

"I think it might be best if we made our agreement again, *which we made the other day*, in front of witnesses this time. It should avoid any potential confusion."

"OK," Emilia replied, looking lost.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Lady Emilia, will you marry me?"

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

Emilia just stared at Subaru, her eyes huge but she didn't pull her hand away.

"How intriguing," Roswaal commented. "If the two of you had intended to be married at the time of this incident, then your property and interests would be unified under law. That would even arguably allow you to carry each other insignias."

"Exactly," Subaru said, not letting go of Emilia's hand. "The Lady Emilia would never let anyone handle her insignia unless she knew they were completely committed to her goals." Subaru said with emphasis. "We met the other day in the market and it was love at first sight. I immediately begged her to marry me and she agreed. Right, my... love?" Subaru asked awkwardly.

Emilia seemed frozen in shock but then she blinked and nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, that is exactly how it happened."

"My... future wife," Subaru struggled to say, "Asked me and my loyal companion Felt, who belongs to my faction, to hold her insignia for her while she went shopping because she was worried about pickpockets. We had a fun filled day in the city and then went to see Felt's grandfather in the slums. Elsa found us and then, well, Reinhard can tell the rest of the story."

"Sir Reinhard will be asked to give testimony," Roswaal mused. "Can he confirm your account or is he willing to be... flexible with his recollections?"

Reinhard's eyes widened. *Will my Lord command me to lie? This is the proverbial knight trap. Whether I obey and lie under oath or whether I refuse to follow my Lord's instructions, I am disgraced regardless. I could be stricken of my knighthood or even imprisoned.*

"I would never ask you to lie, Red," Subaru said firmly. "You weren't present when Emilia and I met right?"

"No," Reinhard replied.

"Then you can neither confirm nor deny Emilia and my account of that meeting. You also didn't meet Felt until the end of the day and I doubt she said much about our 'relationship' while I was bleeding out so you can't confirm or refute that either. If you tried to testify about what you suspect without any evidence to back it up that would be... what's the word? Purgatory or something?"

"Perjury," Roswaal corrected mildly.

"Yeah, that thing," Subaru said with a shrug. "Tell the truth, the full truth, and nothing but the truth. The reality is you weren't present for anything they would be interested in."

Reinhard flushed awkwardly. "I... have no certain knowledge that would contradict any of your statements. If I were under oath I could only confirm and refute the parts I know."

"Splendid," Roswaal murmured.

There was no point in them returning to the capitol so late at night, especially if the Sages' representative was expected early the next morning. The blue haired maid led Reinhard and Subaru to the guest quarters.

"Excuse me, I don't think I caught your name," Subaru said.

"My name is Rem," The maid said, not turning around or breaking stride.

Damn. The maids in this place are terribly unfriendly. I feel like anime lied to me about how pleasant and frisky a maid should be. Or wait, could it be personal? Shit, she probably caught me looking at her breasts.

Subaru bit his lip and gave up on making nice with Rem for the moment.

Alright. Tomorrow is a new day. I'll turn on the charm and see if I can convince her to at least tolerate me. Not getting caught staring at her breasts will probably help.

She led them into a spacious room with two beds.

"Someone will wake you for breakfast. Goodnight," Rem said, closing the door before either of them could respond.

"You know," Subaru said to Reinhard conversationally. "I get the funny impression she might not like me."

"She did seem a little terse. Both maids do in fact," Reinhard agreed as he inspected an old sword that hung on the wall. "I hope it doesn't bother you that we need to share a room."

"Not at all!" Subaru replied, "I don't think it's the first time. How many hours did you spend in that chair waiting for me to wake up?"

Reinhard glanced away uncomfortably.

"Anyone got a calculator?" Subaru mused, getting undressed. "My debt to you seems to keep growing longer."

"What's a calculator?" Reinhard asked.

"Device where I come from, it's used to do math."

"Like an abacus?"

"Sort of," Subaru agreed and slipped under his covers.

Reinhard blew out the lights and then got into his own bed.

"Night, Red."

"Goodnight, Subaru." Reinhard yawned.

"Red?"

"Hm?"

"I know that you were assigned to me but thanks for coming with me out here anyway. You and Emilia are the only friends I've got on this planet. So thanks for keeping an eye on me. I really appreciate it," Subaru mused.

Reinhard was silent a moment. "You're welcome."

Subaru woke up in the middle of the night. He wanted to go back to sleep but unfortunately he really needed to find a bathroom.

Subaru slipped out of his room and, wearing only his shorts, began roaming down the hall.

I guess I forgot to ask where the bathrooms are. Actually, you'd think Ram or Rem would have pointed them out to us anyway. I guess Rem really was angry with me. Wait, do they even have bathrooms here? What do you do when you need to pee at night? I know that old timey places had chamber pots but I didn't see anything like that in the room. Maybe they're not left in bedrooms. I mean, they wouldn't smell very good. So maybe the bathroom or whatever is where the chamber pot is kept? Well great, all I need to do is search this enormous house for anything that looks like a pot and pray that I don't accidentally defile the cookware.

Whatever. I can figure this out. At least I hope I can. Oh God, please don't make me wake up Red and tell him I don't know where to pee at night. Yeah, not doing that. I'll open a window and improvise before I take that step.

Subaru looked around the hallway but all the doors looked the same. He tried using *Reason and Judgment* but found nothing that suggested what was behind any of these doors. He wondered if there was anyone up he could ask for directions. It sounded like someone was still awake in the house. He heard a faint sound like chains rattling together. He really hoped it wasn't somebody in a dungeon or something. That would be creepy.

OK, I am not just going to start opening doors at random. With my luck the first one would be Emilia's room. Actually, that might be OK. We are engaged after all right?

On second thought, that would be a pretty sketchy thing to do to Emilia. The two of us haven't even kissed yet and

sneaking into her bedroom is way beyond acceptable. Besides, Puck would almost certainly kill me if I tried something like that. Oh right, Puck probably doesn't even know about the engagement yet. That's going to be a real fun conversation in the morning.

On top of that if I just start randomly opening doors I have even odds of accidentally opening the door to the twins' bedroom. That would be a fun mistake to try to explain to everybody. Assuming I even lived long enough to try.

The sound of rattling chains was getting louder, coming up behind him. Subaru turned around to investigate.

A spiked morning star came flying at Subaru's head.

Subaru would have died but in a panic he invoked *Indomitable*. The star came straight at Subaru's face and he instinctively punched it in the other direction as hard as he could.

The spikes didn't even scratch his skin and his blow instantly reversed the mace's direction sending it flying back down the hall with the speed of a guided missile. The chain was dragged out of its wielder's hand and the morning star struck a statue a fifty yards down the hall, obliterating it with a sound like thunder.

Subaru bent over in agony. He'd gotten distracted and he'd forgotten to shut off *Indomitable*. He couldn't move and could barely breathe. He was helpless.

Before Subaru could even blink Reinhard was standing in the hallway, half naked. He had a short dull sword in his hand. Subaru guessed that he plucked it off the wall. And the sword was hovering over... Rem.

"Subaru, are you alright?" Reinhard shouted.

"Fine," Subaru answered, panting for breath. "She never even scratched me," He said, standing back up and trying for a cocky grin.

Reinhard looked grim as he looked down at Rem. "Attempted murder of a royal candidate is a crime punishable by death," He declared, raising his sword.

"Reinhard, wait!" Subaru yelled, staggering over to him.

Reinhard looked shocked. "Subaru! She tried to kill you."

"Yes, I know, buddy. I was there," Subaru replied with forced humor. "I just think we should always ask a few questions before killing anybody."

"Rem," Ram said coldly, marching up to them in her uniform carrying a lit candelabra.

"Doesn't anyone sleep around here?" Subaru muttered.

"Subaru!" Emilia yelled, running up in a purple night gown. "What happened?!"

Rem stared down at her sister. "You have attacked a guest without provocation. You have betrayed Lord Roswaal's trust. There is only one punishment possible for such a betrayal. Banishment," Ram said. Subaru saw the tears in her eyes but Ram's voice was ice cold.

"Sister!" Rem gasped.

"Oh, Rem, why would you try to hurt Subaru?" Emilia asked.

"Banishment is hardly the fate she deserves," Reinhard said coldly. "She attacked an unarmed innocent man in cold blood. Such actions merit immediate execution-"

"Lord Roswaal has authority here and he has decreed-" Ram interrupted.

"Hey! Everybody! *Stop talking!*" Subaru shouted.

Everyone stared at Subaru in shocked silence.

"Thank you," Subaru nodded. "Now, not to sound arrogant or anything but since I was the one attacked I feel like I should have the right to ask a few questions before we decide what to do."

Subaru walked up to Rem and knelt down next to her. Reinhard watched the situation grimly. Rem was unarmed and the Sword Saint stood nearby. Rem wouldn't survive long enough to lay a finger on Subaru if she tried anything.

"Rem," Subaru asked gently. "Why would you try to kill me? Have I insulted you in some way?"

She wouldn't really have tried to kill me just because I was looking at her breasts, right? I hope?

"You know why!" Rem almost hissed.

Subaru looked at Reinhard and Emilia for clues but they seemed as lost as he was. Subaru turned back to Rem. "Um, Rem? Why don't you just pretend I'm stupid and enlighten me?"

Rem stared at Subaru with loathing. The look she gave Subaru was so full of naked venom that he struggled not to recoil. "You are a Witch Cultist!"

Subaru frowned and glanced at Reinhard. "Translation?"

"These are the monsters who killed our parents and destroyed our village." Ram said flatly.

"Hey, I wasn't involved in that!" Subaru protested. "I only got to this land a few days ago!"

"The Witch Cultists are a group of fanatical terrorists who plague the continent," Reinhard explained. "They worship the Witch of Envy."

Emilia stiffened.

"Oh right, you mentioned the Witch," Subaru nodded. He turned back to Rem. "Rem, I haven't met a single witch since I've been here." He paused. "So far as I know," Subaru amended. "Regardless, I promise you I am not involved in any cults."

"You must have truly extraordinary evidence against this guest," Ram interrupted. "To merit dismissing the endorsement of both Lady Emilia and Sir Reinhard and attacking unprovoked."

"I'm really not a Witch Cultist. I'm not even from this world. I don't know what the Witch Cult is," Subaru explained.

"You reek of the Witch's stench," Rem spat at Subaru.

Subaru blinked and discretely tried to sniff himself.

"You stand convicted of attempted murder," Reinhard said.

"Lord Roswaal orders you to depart his lands forthwith," Ram pronounced. "You will *never* be allowed to return!"

"Ram!" Rem gasped.

"But Ram she's your sister-" Emilia protested.

"Exile is an outrageously merciful-" Reinhard argued.

"I feel like I should get a vote here!" Subaru yelled. "I mean, I was the one attacked."

Ram glanced at him. "And what would your be vote?" She asked coldly.

"Well," Subaru hesitated. He knew this was dumb but the thought of Reinhard running the girl through with that sword made him want to throw up. He could already picture the vast pool of blood spreading across the carpet. It was like a flashback to the night Elsa slashed him. "Could we just pretend... this didn't happen? I mean nobody actually got hurt. `Cept for that statue," He added.

Subaru sighed. "Rem, I'll make you a deal. You wait until you actually see me trying to do something nefarious before you kill me and we can just write off this whole incident as a bad mistake." He paused. "It's one thing to kill evil people. If I really was a Witch Cultist here to threaten your sister and your home then I'd understand you attacking me. You'd be acting in self defense. But it's important that you're sure that the person you're killing actually deserves it. It's really very hard to put a shattered life back together if you start having second thoughts, Rem," He finished sadly.

Everyone except Ram stared at Subaru. Ram simply sniffed. "Lord Roswaal predicted that you might say that. He informed me that if Subaru requested it, Rem could remain here in her current role."

Ram then turned around and calmly walked away as if there was simply nothing more to be said.

Rem stared at Subaru in naked astonishment for a moment.

"Come along, Rem," Ram called.

Rem would have followed her but Reinhard again pressed his sword to her throat. "Subaru! Are you... certain?" Reinhard asked.

Subaru shifted uncomfortably. "I don't really think she'll do it again. And nobody got hurt so... I'd really rather not have to kill her," Subaru kept picturing the huge pool of blood that he had seen spreading around his body before he lost consciousness in the loot house. The notion of doing that to somebody else, or getting Reinhard to do it, made him sick to his stomach.

Reinhard glowered at Rem but ultimately stepped away lowering his sword. "My lord's commands are absolute," Reinhard murmured. "But should you threaten Subaru again you will die before you ever see if your blow lands."

Rem gave Subaru a suspicious look but then hurried after her sister.

"Are you sure that was wise?" Reinhard asked Subaru quietly.

"No," Subaru admitted. "But I'm not sure it would have been wise to kill her either and that's much more important."

Subaru stared after the departing maids. "Damn it. I meant to ask them where the bathroom was."

Emilia had told him where to find the bathroom and now that he had relieved himself, Subaru and Reinhard were

settling back into bed. Reinhard had insisted on accompanying his lord and waiting outside the bathroom to prevent any further attacks, a habit that Subaru truly hoped he would break shortly. On the bright side, they apparently did have things like toilets and bathtubs and showers here. He guessed they functioned off magic instead of indoor plumbing but it was just good to know that he would be able to stay clean.

Subaru laid back, resting his head on his arms. He didn't think he'd get back to sleep very soon. "Reinhard?" Subaru called.

"Yes?"

"It occurs to me that I never got around to asking you what you thought about my engagement," Subaru paused. "I mean, the one that Emilia and I made the other day, of course."

"Yes, of course," Reinhard said with a snort.

"So do you have an opinion on it?"

Reinhard sighed. "You certainly don't need my approval."

"I wasn't really asking for your approval. I was just curious what you thought."

Reinhard was quiet for a moment. "Subaru. Tell me something, how... invested were you in the royal selection?"

Subaru took a deep breath. "Before I told Emilia that I'd help her, you mean? Not very, to be honest. I didn't want to disrespect you or your culture, but the notion of me being a leader, well it's almost funny. I know nothing at all about Lagunica. I can't read the language, I have no idea about the history or the culture. Wouldn't claiming I could rule Laguncia effectively, lead it to a brighter future after being here for all of three days be... well the height of arrogance?"

Well, now that I've told Emilia I'll help her win the election to help her people, I guess I'm all in. I may now qualify as the most cocky man in history. It's probably decisions like this that convinced the 'whoever it was' that I deserved that Authority of Pride thingy.

Subaru was silent a moment. "You want to know the truth, Red? When I first met you the other day, I'd been here for all of ten minutes. I was so excited. This was a brand new world and I felt like... I'd been sent here for a reason."

Reinhard glanced at Subaru. "Why do you think you were sent here?"

Subaru gave a deprecating chuckle. "It's stupid."

Reinhard didn't reply.

After a moment or two, Subaru sighed. "I was... pretty worthless back home. Nobody expected much of anything from me. Nobody except my parents really cared if I was alive. I thought maybe I'd been sent here so that I could be more than that. That maybe I could be someone special here. Maybe even be something like a hero..."

Reinhard turned over to look at Subaru. "Don't you think that you are?"

Subaru laughed. "Red, you are by far the nicest guy I've ever met!" Subaru paused for a moment. "You know, when we met the other day, if you'd handed me that insignia I would have been over the moon. I would have told you flat out that I was the perfect man to be king. Give me six months, I'll whip this country into shape!" Subaru laughed at himself.

He shook his head. "But things are a lot more complicated than that. The fight with Elsa reminded me of how far down the food chain I really am. I'm not a hero, I'm just me. But... at the same time, that doesn't mean I have to be the same loser I was back on my world. I can do little things to help.

"It's weird. I know back home I had the same small opportunities to help make people's lives better but I never really thought that much about them. But I come here and suddenly I'm motivated to try."

Subaru chuckled. "It's probably Emilia's influence. Maybe I'm just really motivated to show off for a pretty girl."

Reinhard looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Subaru, Lady Emilia told me how you pushed her out of the way of Elsa's attack. What was your plan for dealing with the Bowel Hunter?"

Subaru snorted. "*Plan?* What plan? I totally thought Elsa was going to cut me in half!"

"So, you were going to save Lady Emilia at the cost of your own life?"

"Well, I didn't really think of it like that. If I had stopped to think it through I probably wouldn't have been able to move! I just wanted to protect Emilia. Like I said: I'm a sucker for a pretty face," Subaru snickered.

"And then you gave Felt and Rom every coin you had?"

"Hey, those guys really needed it. You saw the way they lived," Subaru replied.

"My friend," Reinhard said. "I think you have a distorted idea of what being a hero really is. You showed true courage and true kindness that night. I think you are seriously underrating yourself."

Subaru was quiet for a long time. "You really think so?"

"I do. I was going to request to be your knight not simply because I felt it necessary to watch you, but because you showed courage and kindness I have rarely seen."

"Watch me?" Subaru asked.

Reinhard was silent for a long moment and then sighed. "It seems the time has come to confess my sins. I have played you false, my friend. This was inexcusable both as a friend and a knight of the realm. I will accept any penance you deem-"

"Red," Subaru interrupted impatiently. "I don't believe for a minute that anything you did wasn't motivated by the best of intentions, so just fess up so I can forgive you."

Reinhard sighed again. "The day we met, two of my Blessings activated. My Blessing of Judgment and my Blessing of Empathy."

"Judgment..." Subaru mused. "Didn't you use that on me once? That's what told you I didn't have any powers?"

"Yes," Reinhard agreed. "But it told me more than that. I sensed inside of you... power. Enormous dangerous power, the likes of which I had never encountered before," He paused. "Truthfully, I was tempted to challenge you then and there. I wondered if you might not have been a danger to the city."

"Huh. Well, that would have been a real quick fight," Subaru observed. "Why didn't you attack me then?"

"My Blessing of Empathy told me that you had no foul intentions. You had no desire to hurt anyone. So I decided I had no right to interfere with you but I resolved to find you later and make sure that I hadn't been mistaken," Reinhard said.

"Sounds reasonable. I probably would have done the same thing so don't beat yourself up over it, Red. Besides the next time I saw you, you saved my life. That kind of inclines me to forgive you," Subaru chuckled. He paused. "What made you decide to tell me about this now?"

"You did," Reinhard replied. "You risked your life to save the Lady Emilia. You offered every coin you had to a slum girl most would have ignored or abused. You showed pity and forgiveness to a woman who tried to kill you without just cause. If all this is an act to convince me that an evil being is kind and noble hearted, it is too good a act for my feeble brain and I confess myself fooled."

"Thank you, Red." Subaru replied. "I think."

"I simply couldn't understand why such a kind person would be given such dark power. It made no sense," Reinhard mused.

"Well, don't ask at me," Subaru replied. He frowned. "Red, do you think there might be some truth to Rem's suspicion? Could I connected to those cultists and their witch?"

Reinhard didn't answer right away. "Subaru, why do *you* think you were sent here?"

"No idea," Subaru chuckled. "Probably at random, or maybe by mistake. Why? Do you have any ideas?"

Reinhard paused a moment. "I wonder if you were selected to hold this power and to keep it safe and harmless. If perhaps such dangerous magic needed a guardian and the world chose you?"

"Hard to believe I would be anyone's first choice for anything. Frankly, I think you'd be a much better candidate, Red." Subaru commented.

"Hm," Reinhard answered. "So what will you do at the royal selection? Will you return your insignia?"

"Nope, can't do that," Subaru replied. "I made Emilia a promise and that promise means something to me. I'm going to do everything I can to help her heal her people. That means I'm going to run for the throne just as hard and as fast as I can. I mean, we can't win," Subaru admitted with a rueful laugh. "But if we can just do well enough to change the conversation that might be enough."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Well, if we do well enough in the selection then one of our rivals might make a bargain for our support: they give us the blood, we drop out of the race and give them our support. Besides, in a campaign my rivals need to have an answer for whatever I say, right? If I say that the poor of Lagunica are suffering in misery and I have a plan to raise the quality of life across the whole country, the other candidates need to say *something* on the topic. Otherwise they'll be at a disadvantage. If that conversation becomes a major part of the campaigns, anyone who wants to get elected needs to build their own platforms to help the poor and disadvantaged in the kingdom. If I play this right, I could force the new king to commit to making serious reforms without ever coming close to the throne."

"I never thought of it like that," Reinhard muttered. "How will you do it? Will you feel around for offers for your withdrawal at the opening ceremony?"

Subaru winced. "Red, you are my dear friend and quite definitely the best man I have ever met but you would make a horrible salesman. If you tell someone that you want out, you're telling them you'll accept a pittance for them to buy you out. No, we can't take this easy. We can't win but we damn better make it look like we can. Never underestimate the power of the bluff. I want to walk into that opening ceremony and terrify the hell out of all the other candidates. They need to know that Emilia and I are their major opponents in claiming the throne. As soon we clear up Emilia's problem

with the Sages' council, she and I need to go to school."

"School?"

"Metaphorically speaking. We need to practice our speeches, we need to prepare our policies, we need fifteen different answers for every conceivable question. I want the other candidates to leave the ceremony feeling like they were unprepared and got blindsided."

"Are you really doing all of this for the Lady Emilia?"

"Well no, not all of it. I'm also trying to do it for Felt and Rom who are considered disposable human beings. And for Petra and Meili who told me they don't always have enough to eat in the winter. And maybe even for those little boys in the village who kept dog piling me to the ground," Subaru grumbled which led Reinhard to laugh. "If I can bring all of their stories into the selection, if I can make the nobles care about what happens to them, then maybe I really can make things change," Subaru paused, "And in a weird way I'm doing all of this for me."

"It's funny. The old me would have just slow walked a project like this. If I thought victory was unlikely I probably wouldn't have bothered doing anything more than the minimum required. I'd have given up before I even started."

"I don't think I like the old me very much. Here, I actually have a chance to reinvent myself; to be someone better than I was in my world. This time, I'm kind of excited to go all in and see what I can really do when I'm pushed to it." Subaru stopped and then laughed at himself. "All that said, of course, the real reason I jumped into this was because Emilia needed me to."

"Do you love her?"

Subaru was quiet for a long time. "No. I barely know her," He sighed. "She's gorgeous. She's kind, sweet, and brave. I am hugely attracted to her. I think we're going to be close friends. I hate to see her cry and apparently I'm willing to move mountains to prevent her tears. But I'm also well aware that I barely know her. It would take a long time for us to fall in love, assuming we ever do." Subaru chuckled derisively. "But wouldn't it be fun trying?"

"In that case, Subaru, I can also answer your other question."

"Which question was that?"

"How do I feel about the engagement," Reinhard answered.

"Oh, right. That one."

"I think you did a very noble thing. It was a generous deed regardless of your personal motivations and no matter how it works out, I don't think you'll regret trying."

"Thanks, buddy," Subaru said. "That means a lot coming from you."

"There's just one thing about this plan that I admit I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"If you were going to run seriously for the throne anyway, why did you need to marry Emilia? Couldn't you have either won the selection or negotiated for withdrawal on your own and then simply given Emilia the blood you acquired?"

"...Wait! That was an option?!"

The next morning, Rem came to the room as the boys were finishing getting dressed.

"Good morning," Rem said in a neutral tone. "Breakfast will be served shortly." Her demeanor was formal but her eyes remained suspicious when she looked at Subaru.

"Wonderful," Reinhard said coldly. "Allow me to assist you preparing it." He said to Rem in a tone that didn't brook refusal.

Rem stared at Reinhard for a moment then bowed and left the room without a word followed by Reinhard. As Reinhard followed Rem out he gave Subaru a look, wordlessly bidding him to be careful.

Subaru nodded.

Subaru gave Reinhard and Rem a few minutes to get ahead of him. He didn't think Rem would actually try anything if he was near her but she would also be wishing him a painful death with every look she gave him and Reinhard could misinterpret her hate as an impending attack. He thought Rem would be safer if he was nowhere near her.

I'm worrying about the safety of someone who tried to kill me last night, Subaru thought. What's next? Asking Elsa if she just needs a hug?

Subaru left his room and headed down to the dining room.

Along the way Subaru saw Emilia making the same journey.

"Good morning, Subaru," Emilia said with an awkward smile. "Are you OK?"

"Sure! Never better! What because of that assassination attempt? Come on, that was nothing! I'm averaging an attempted murder every day since I got here!" He said with an uncomfortable laugh. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," Emilia answered.

The conversation stopped and they both stared at each other.

Subaru coughed. "Um, so you think we could talk a minute before going downstairs?"

"Of course," Emilia answered.

Subaru stepped close to a large window overlooking the courtyard and gaze out at the beautifully manicured grounds. Emilia stood beside him.

"So..." Subaru began, "We didn't really have much of a chance to talk yesterday after I, you know, after I-"

"Asked me to marry you?" Emilia asked with a wry smile.

"Oh good. You *do* remember that part," Subaru quipped.

Emilia giggled.

Subaru sighed. "Look, I know I didn't give you much chance to think about it. It was the only way I could think of to keep you in the election. And I don't really know how you feel about... well, fuck, *anything!* I don't know what your views on marriage are, I don't know what you're looking for in a man, hell maybe you're already in love with someone else and I've just made your life twice as complicated by this stunt!" Subaru continued talking very fast. "We don't actually have to get married if you don't want to, we could dissolve the engagement after the selection is over. I mean, I just wanted you to know that I really do care about you. I'm only trying to help you out and if you can think of a better strategy to handle things I will do my best to do whatever you want."

Subaru stopped talking only because he was completely out of breath.

Emilia looked at him strangely.

Subaru closed his eyes. "Emilia, please say something. I'm dying here."

"It's just..." She murmured. "I never really thought I'd get married. I'm a silver haired half-elf."

"Do elves not get married?" Subaru asked.

Emilia shook her head. "No, it's not that. The Witch of Envy was a silver haired half-elf so most people hate me on sight."

Subaru took a moment to absorb that. "Well, that's just dumb. Your appearance doesn't say anything about who you are as a person."

Emilia was speaking quickly, "I know you don't love me but I'm grateful that you're trying to help me save my people. I don't know anything about being a wife and I'm probably going to be bad at it but I promise I'll do my best to try and make you happy."

Subaru blinked.

Emilia was staring at him, panting as if she just run a marathon, waiting for his response.

"Well," Subaru said slowly. "I mean I don't love you *yet* but I'd really like to."

"I don't follow," Emilia replied.

"Well, I'm just saying we barely know each other! I mean, you're gorgeous, you're brave, and you're kind, I feel like you'd be really easy to fall in love with! I just think it kind of takes time," Subaru shrugged. "You're clearly the one getting the short end of the stick here. I'm a stranger in these lands who doesn't know anybody, doesn't know the customs or history, and can't even read the language. Frankly my whole life I've been kind of a loser and I'm not sure how much help I can be but I promise that I'll try my hardest to help you save your people."

"Don't talk about yourself that way!" Emilia said with surprising heat. "You saved my life in town! And if you hadn't helped me find my insignia I would have already lost my right to stand for election. Then you offered to... marry me to keep me in the election," Emilia finished with a blush. She glanced away. "I know this isn't what you wanted... marrying a half-elf will mean everyone will treat you differently."

"Great. Easy way to identify all the assholes so I don't waste my time trying to be nice to them," Subaru yawned.

Emilia blinked.

"You're a good person, Emilia. You're determined to help your people. Anyone who looks at you and sees something evil is blind and an idiot on top of it. Maybe we'll never fall in love, Emilia but I'll always be your friend. And no matter what happens I'll always be proud to stand beside you," Subaru said earnestly.

Emilia's eyes started tearing up.

"Oh shit, what did I say?" Subaru said chagrined. "I'm sorry, Mili. I never think before I talk. You've probably noticed that about me. Whatever I said that upset you, I'm really sorry."

"I'm not upset," Emilia said with a weak laugh, wiping her tears. "I'm happy!"

"Oh. Well. I have no idea what I could have said to make you happy but I'm thrilled that I said it!" Subaru replied.

Emilia laughed, "Subaru, you're so dumb."

"Yes I am," Subaru agreed wryly. "Um, so what would you say to going on a date sometime?"

"What's a date?"

Subaru blinked. "A date...", He said slowly. "Is... like part of courtship."

"But we're already engaged," Emilia pointed out.

"Sure! But we don't know each other very well. A date is a chance for people who like each other to go out together, do fun things, learn about each other and maybe develop a deeper emotional connection. Besides even after we're... married, there's no reason we should stop dating! It's part of maintaining a bond with your... lover. Well, that's what my Dad told me anyway," He finished lamely.

Emilia looked intrigued. "In that case, I think I'd like to go on a date."

"Awesome!" Subaru exclaimed, taking her hand with a broad grin.

Emilia also started to smile and they simply stared at each other for a moment.

Subaru coughed. "So, shall we go down to breakfast?"

Emilia flushed. "Um, there's one thing I thought maybe we should take care of first."

"What's that?"

"We should really tell Puck about our engagement."

The blood drained from Subaru's face. "You didn't tell him?"

"No," Emilia glanced away, pulling some of her silver hair across her face like a veil. "I thought maybe we could tell him together."

Oh great, Subaru thought. *If she's afraid to tell him, then what chance do I have? He's going to splatter me all over the walls!*

Emilia took a deep breath. "Marriage is about doing things together after all," She said with the earnestness of a child.

Subaru rolled his eyes toward heaven. *Well, what can I possibly say to that?*

"OK," Subaru sighed. "Let's tell him."

Emilia nodded.

"You won't let him kill me, will you?"

Emilia gave him an amused smile. "Subaru, it won't be *that* bad," Emilia said.

I really wish you sounded like you had more confidence in what you were saying, Subaru thought.

"OK, let's talk to Daddy," Subaru said, squaring his shoulders and sitting down on the window sill.

Emilia sat beside him and placed her other hand on the green gem hanging around her neck and closed her eyes.

A moment later the air in front of them shimmered and a small gray cat appeared, floating curled up in thin air. Puck yawned and stretched.

"Mmm. Good morning, Lia. Hi, Subaru," Puck said.

Emilia flushed but didn't say anything.

Oh, come on, Mili. You're going to make me do this all alone?! Whatever happened to 'marriage is about doing things together?!' I mean, I guess it's traditional for the man to ask the Father's permission but there's nothing traditional about asking a magical talking cat if you can marry his daughter!

Subaru cleared his throat, wondering if *Indomitable* would let him survive jumping through the window and landing in the courtyard three floors below in case he needed to make a quick escape.

"Puck," Subaru began slowly. "Emilia and I, wanted to talk to you. We have something... very important to tell you."

I feel like I'm counting down the final seconds of my life here, Subaru thought.

"Oh? What's that?" Puck asked with a yawn.

"So," Subaru squared his shoulders. "You may be unaware of this but yesterday we found out that Emilia's qualifications to serve in the royal selection were called into question because her insignia was stolen. Felt and I handled it so that actually disqualifies her."

"Oh no," Puck said. Subaru was a little taken aback by Puck's tone. Puck sounded as if Subaru had been describing Emilia's long arranged picnic being ruined by a surprise rainstorm. "I'm sorry, Lia."

"The thing is, it's only a problem if the insignia leaves Emilia's control, so we decided to recruit Felt into the camp. The issue is that I also held Emilia's insignia and I'm qualified to stand in the selection so I can't join her camp. So we put our heads together and thought of a way to keep Emilia in the selection," Subaru continued.

"Oh? What's that?" Puck asked sounding only vaguely curious.

Subaru swallowed hard. "I asked Emilia to marry me."

Puck was silent but his eyes narrowed.

"I've sworn to help Emilia to save her people and by proposing to her we can keep Emilia in the royal selection and give her a chance to do that."

"You want... to marry... my daughter...," Puck rumbled like an approaching thunderstorm.

Well, it's not going as well as I hoped but so far it's not quite as bad as I expected, Subaru thought.

"Yes-"

"What makes you think you could ever be good enough for Lia?" Puck demanded and small shards of floating ice crystals began to form around the incensed cat.

"Puck-" Emilia protested.

"I don't," Subaru said clearly.

Emilia and Puck both looked at Subaru.

Subaru invoked *Reason and Judgment* to freeze time.

Wait. 'I don't?' As in 'I don't think I'm good enough for Emilia?' What a ridiculous comment! I was the one who found her insignia. I was the one who devised the plan to keep her in the royal selection. I'm the one who risked his life to protect her. What has Puck done recently beside making clever comments and gotten in the way? He's questioning if I deserve Emilia? Who in the world is he to determine that?

Alright. Let's keep our focus here, Subaru sighed. *Silly as your comment was, it was probably a shrewd gambit. It will likely make Puck listen to you at least for a moment. And it is critical to keep Puck happy, or at least make him provisionally accept the situation if you don't want to be turned into an ice cube or bounced all over the courtyard. So what does the annoying cat really want to hear right now?*

Well he's angry that I'm trying to take his daughter away. Can't do too much about that. I could try the 'you're not losing a daughter, you're gaining a son' trope but instinct tells me that would just make him blow me out the window at Mach 3. He also thinks I could never deserve her in a million years. Perhaps that's my best tactic: to reassure him that I take this opportunity seriously because it's an opportunity far above my 'station.'

Subaru restarted time.

Oh shit. Reason and Judgment's confidence is disappearing like water into dry sand. What the fuck! I really need it right now. Sometimes it lasts for minutes and sometimes it vanishes instantly. What the hell are the rules?

Oh well. I have to say something!

"I don't have any reason to think I'm good enough for Emilia," Subaru said honestly. "She's beautiful, brave, and selfless and she totally deserves better than some loser who rarely comes out of his room. I'm just trying to help her. Mostly, I'm blundering along on persistence and effort but she accepted me anyway."

Puck tilted his head. He didn't look any friendlier but at least he was listening. "Subaru, I haven't forgotten that the last time Lia followed you around, you almost got her killed," Puck growled. "What happens if I let her be with you and she does get... hurt?"

Crap what do I say. I need to think.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and time froze.

Wait. 'Let' her be with me? Puck, your daughter in a grown up! You can't tell her what to do. On the other hand in all fairness if I was a magical talking cat, that might be older than the whole world for all I know, I'd probably have a different definition of what being an adult means too. So how do I appease the magic flying cat? I suppose the best way of handling these types of confrontations is always to do what your opponent doesn't expect.

He unfroze time.

Still suffused with *Reason and Judgment's* confidence, Subaru didn't hesitate. "If Emilia comes to harm, take my head. I won't need it anymore."

Well, that's certainly an easy promise to make. Glad that I'm still feeling Reason and Judgment's calm or I'd be freaking out right now. There's no way I can stop Puck from killing me whenever he wants. If it really comes down to it, I might as well bow my head and accept my death with dignity rather than running away screaming and living maybe a fraction of a second longer. But the important thing is that offering my life as collateral might at least convince Puck that I'm taking this responsibility seriously.

Puck's sharp ice crystals moved closer to Subaru, one crystal's tip poking him lightly in the throat.

"That is a very dangerous price to offer, Subaru," Puck said.

"Puck! Stop this!" Emilia demanded.

"I can't promise that Emilia will never get hurt with me," Subaru said, ignoring the ice and looking Puck dead in the eye. "The only people who could make you a promise like that are liars and fools."

Subaru saw Puck's eyes narrow but at least he was listening.

What would an actual... hero say in a situation like this? How would a character from an anime win over a skeptical father? Well, probably by beating him up but that isn't an option here. Think about all those romance animes you'd never admit to watching. Act like one of those guys.

"What I can promise is that no matter what happens, Emilia will always be in the forefront of my thoughts and that her safety and happiness will be primary concern," Subaru said.

Damn. I feel the confidence fading again.

"I promise to keep learning how to be a better partner and I promise that even if Emilia decides I'm not the man for her, I'll remain her steadfast friend and my admiration for her will be no less," Subaru finished.

Puck's tail lashed but he didn't say anything.

Emilia was staring at the floor while blushing furiously.

"Lia," Puck said, not looking away from Subaru. "Is this really what you want?"

Emilia bit her lip and nodded. "I'll do anything to save the elves. Subaru is doing this to help me. And... I like Subaru. He's been really kind and..." She trails off.

Puck stared at Subaru for a long moment. "Subaru," He said in a warning tone. "I promise you that you will pay for every tear Lia sheds with a gallon of your own."

And Puck vanished.

Subaru let out an explosive breath that he didn't even realize he was holding and slumped against Emilia. "Well," He said. "That went better than expected."

"It did?"

"Oh yeah," Subaru said, letting his hand slip around Emilia's. "I totally expected to be splattered all over the walls by now."

Emilia snickered. "Puck likes you. I don't think he would have done that."

Subaru gave her a steady look.

Emilia flushed. "Well, he *probably* wouldn't have done that."

"Well anyway, that's one problem solved," Subaru said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "If we need to talk to that sage guy today we should probably get our stories straight."

"What do you mean?"

"This guy is going to ask us questions to establish if we're lying or not. So let's tell him the truth except for two changes: when we met in the alley I proposed and then Felt, who was one of my... whatever you call them, carried your insignia for us. It's short and easy to remember so we probably won't get tripped up. We spent the day wandering around the city and then went to the tavern to meet Felt's grandpa. Everything else we can just tell the truth."

Emilia thought it over. "I really hate lying," She complained.

"Get used to it," Subaru said bluntly. "If you want to be King, you're going to find any number of occasions where telling the whole truth is not a good idea."

"It's extremely important to always keep your word," Emilia asserted firmly.

"It's *hugely* important," Subaru agreed. "Credibility isn't like a boomerang: if you throw it away, it doesn't come back. Dad always told me that you could only lie to somebody once so you better make it count. But if we *don't* lie to this guy then you're out of the selection."

Emilia looked unconvinced.

"Sorry to have to put it this way, Mili, but the truth is that you can either have your miracle cure or your pride but probably not both," Subaru said.

Emilia brooded on that for a moment. "Alright," She said reluctantly. "But I don't like it," She was almost pouting.

"Good," Subaru agreed with a smile. "I'm not crazy about it either. But this won't be the last game we have to play in this selection thing so let's get good at it. It's going to be a long journey before we get our hands on that miracle you need but I'm looking forward to every step."

Emilia gave him a shy smile. "Maybe we should go get breakfast," She suggested.

"Great idea," Subaru said, getting up with Emilia and heading for the stairs.

Subaru noticed that Emilia did not remove her hand from his and he thought that was rather nice.

"-And then Elsa slashed me while I was trying to protect my wife," Subaru concluded. Emilia sat next to him, her hand wrapped firmly around his.

Miklotov McMahon, an old man with a long gray beard who had presided over the Sages' Council for decades, had flown to the manor on a wyvern to investigate claims of Emilia's disqualification.

"You met this girl only two days ago and you immediately asked her to be your bride?" McMahon asked with profound skepticism. "Isn't that rather rushed?"

"Love is never done untimely, it occurs precisely when it is meant to," Subaru answered with aplomb.

"Why not wait until you knew each other longer? You don't seem so irrationally reckless as to marry a woman on sight," He asked.

"Actually, I am pretty reckless," Subaru admitted. "Besides, the longer we went un-engaged the longer we would be rivals. What kind of courtship would that be?"

This gave McMahon pause. "She is a half-elf," McMahon pointed out.

Subaru scowled and forgot his manners. "She is beautiful, brave, and noble hearted and anyone who insults Emilia insults me! Remember that!"

The words hung there in silence.

Subaru mentally played his words back to himself and immediately wanted to cry. *You idiot! Yeah, you have great odds to convince him now. You never think before you act. I need to live in Reason and Judgment's slow time. Maybe if it took me five hundred years to say each word I could at least make certain I picked the right one!*

However, the Sage's face appeared suddenly thoughtful. "Proposing to a half-elf on your first meeting and then daring to chide a member of the Sages' council for rudeness. I take it back. Clearly thinking things through before acting is not your dominant trait."

Subaru coughed. McMahon's statement was clearly an insult but at the same time the Sage appeared to be reconsidering whether Subaru was lying to him or if he was just hopelessly impulsive. "My wife is attempting to train me," Subaru replied. "There is, of course, scarce hope for her success although we may all pray for a miracle."

McMahon stroked his beard. "You did not know you were a selection candidate at the time, correct?"

"Initially I was planning to join Lady Emilia's camp and offer my full support to my wife," Subaru lied smoothly. "It was only when I touched her insignia that we realized there could have been a problem. Luckily our engagement prevented what would have been an awkward incident."

"And what of the girl... Felt, you said?"

"I have engaged her to perform certain services for my wife and myself. She can rightly be considered part of my camp."

"Hm," McMahon muttered. He turned to Roswaal. "Lord Roswaal, do you have any testimony to add?"

"I was not present for most of these events, your Excellency. I can only confirm that their engagement was made and, as Lady Emilia's sponsor and guardian, I have given my permission," He replied.

"If they did not have your permission initially, was not the engagement invalid?" McMahon asked.

"My permission was only a formality, your Excellency. As a royal candidate, Lady Emilia far outranks me, it would have been unthinkable for me to refuse. She simply made her wishes clear and I have complied," Roswaal replied easily.

McMahon glanced at Reinhard. "Sir Reinhard, do you have any testimony to offer?"

"Like Lord Roswaal, I was not present for the original engagement between my Lord and Lady. I arrived only in time to rescue my Lord Subaru from the Bowel Hunter," Reinhard answered.

"Did you meet this girl, this... Felt?" He asked.

"Yes, your Excellency."

"What can you tell me of the relationship between her and Lord Subaru? Did it seem like one of master and retainer?" McMahon asked.

Reinhard looked at McMahon for a long moment. "There are many forms of retainer relationships. I *was* present when Lord Subaru offered Miss Felt a bag of gold."

"Did he tell her what this was for?" McMahon asked sharply.

"He told her that it was 'a business investment' and said he was going to use her for future tasks involving himself and the Lady Emilia. He said in exchange he would assist her in escaping the slums," Reinhard finished.

I was joking that the gold I gave her was in exchange for helping me to play pranks on Emilia! Damn, Red, you should have been a lawyer! Subaru thought.

McMahon was silent for a time. "Lord Roswaal, this attempt they are making to unify two camps is unprecedented," McMahon complained.

"Much of this situation is unprecedented," Emilia interjected. "Lagunica has never chosen a king in this manner before. We have agreed to merge our claims for both personal and political reasons. We are convinced that together we can do a far better job of leading Lagunica than either of us would alone."

Nicely done, Emilia! Subaru squeezed her hand with a smile and received a shy smile in return.

McMahon looked at everyone carefully. "Very well," He said finally. "Since there is no clear evidence of wrong doing...", McMahon gave Subaru and Emilia a suspicious look. "I will not be confiscating Lady Emilia's insignia at this time. Tomorrow night we will have a full meeting of the Sages' council to make a final determination regarding Lady Emilia's suitability to engage in the selection. Lord Roswaal and Sir Reinhard, I ask that you be in attendance to provide testimony."

Both men bowed obediently.

McMahon snorted and swept from the room.

Subaru leaned over to Reinhard. "How quick could we get back to the capital?"

"I can get there in just a few hours if I leave the carriage here and go on foot," Reinhard whispered back.

"Wait, really?"

"It's one of my Divine Blessings," Reinhard explained.

"Damn, dude, you're like an army of one."

"Thank you, but I am concerned about leaving you alone with the blue haired maid," Reinhard said.

Subaru shook his head. "Don't worry. I don't think Rem will try anything and, to be completely honest, I think I could probably handle her if she did."

Reinhard stared at him for a moment, considering before nodding.

"The other problem," Reinhard continued, "Is that traveling by wyvern, McMahon will get there well before I can. He'll try to find Felt and question her before we can explain the situation," Reinhard replied.

"That shouldn't be an issue. I think it will take McMahon a week to find her," Subaru snorted.

"What are you saying? McMahon is the head of the Sages' Council. In the King's absence he controls the royal guard. He will immediately send an army down there to flush her out," Reinhard replied.

"That's exactly why it will take him forever to find her. If he sent a guy down there with a bag of gold he'd find her in an hour but I'm sure he'll do just what you said and send in the guard. The folks down there don't have much use for the guard and they're not going to talk to them unless they're forced to. But they *will* warn Felt that people are looking for her and Felt will go underground. Go find Rom. Rom will listen to you, he knows that you're OK. Tell them we need to talk to Felt and it's serious. He'll take you to her," Subaru said.

"That is... actually a very good strategy," Reinhard said.

"Also," Subaru continued after a moment. "Ask them if they'll really be in my camp. I want them to help me tear down those slums. I want to find homes and jobs for everyone down there. Ask them if they're willing to help me do that."

"Subaru," Reinhard said wide eyed. "That is an enormous undertaking."

"Got to go big if I'm going to save this kingdom and I think that's a perfect place to start!" Subaru said with a wild grin.

Reinhard grinned at Subaru in return as he stood up and simply disappeared from the room in a blur almost too fast to see.

Roswaal had retreated to his office to take care of some correspondence and the maids were busy cleaning. This left Subaru and Emilia alone.

The two sat together on a couch in a nearby sitting room. Ram had left them some tea. They each felt like they were waiting for the other to say something.

"Have you given any thought to your platform?" Subaru asked, mostly just to escape the quiet.

"Platform?"

"Yeah, you know: why should you be the one on the throne?" Subaru explained.

"I need to cure my people," Emilia replied in confusion.

Subaru blinked. "I get that, Emilia," He replied slowly. "I know why *you* need the throne. The question is why should anyone give it to you? How will you make people's lives better because frankly, I don't think that curing your forest is high on most people's wish list or else they would have done it already."

Emilia thought about it for a moment. "I want to create a kingdom where everyone is equal," She said firmly.

"Sounds good," Subaru approved. "That will at least bring the the demi-human population solidly behind you, and of course the fact that you're a demi-human will help too. Of course they are a minority in the kingdom," Subaru paused. "Wait, can they even vote?"

Emilia hesitated. "I'm not sure."

Subaru sighed. "Well, that's the first thing we need to figure out. We need to know who we're trying to appeal to," Subaru closed his eyes for a moment.

"So what's your 'platform' going to be?" Emilia asked him.

"Well, I think we should really have one shared platform but you've been doing this longer than I have so I just assumed that you'd have one already put one together," Subaru replied. He paused a moment before answering. "I want to destroy those slums. I don't know if that will win me any votes but that's really what I want to do. I want to ensure that everyone in the kingdom has a job, food in their bellies and a roof over their heads."

"That sounds good!" Emilia approved.

"Well, maybe," Subaru admitted. "We need to figure out who we're trying to appeal to. If the only people who get to vote are the nobility, which would be a serious social problem for the kingdom all on its own, then anything that doesn't directly benefit the nobility won't get us any closer to the throne."

"That's just wrong!" Emilia complained.

"No argument here but the Sages' Council set the rules to this game and we just have to play along unless you brought along another set of dice," Subaru replied.

"Dice?"

"Metaphorically speaking," Subaru clarified. "They have the dragon blood and, unless we have another way of getting some, we need to convince the Sages to give us access to it." He paused. "Is slaying a dragon out of the question?"

"Can you fight a dragon?" Emilia asked in surprise.

"I wouldn't want to bet on it, no." Subaru admitted. He scratched his chin. "Do you know if there's a library around here? I mean, besides Beako's library since I doubt she'd let us in?"

"Oh yes. I spend most days in there studying," Emilia said.

"Nice. Maybe we can go do some research and figure out how these selection things work. That should help us come up with a strategy," Subaru suggested then he frowned. "Of course I can't read the language here so I guess I won't be much use in a library," Subaru sighed.

"That's fine. I can read it to you," Emilia said a little shyly.

Subaru smiled. "I like that idea."

Reinhard returned to the city shortly before sunset. He avoided the Astrea estate, not wanting to encounter his father right now, or any royal guards really. Reinhard hid in the shadows and walked through alleys as he carefully made his way to the slums.

Upon arrival, Reinhard saw far more guards in the slums than usual. They were all walking around and asking

questions of the locals. Reinhard had never had much practice at sneaking but he learned quickly and managed to get to the loot house unseen. The giant Rom was cleaning his bar with a damp rag. A tarp was covering the sizable hole that Reinhard had made in the roof during his fight with Elsa.

"Master Rom," Reinhard said quietly.

"I haven't seen her," Rom said in a bored voice before Reinhard could continue.

"Master Rom, I'm not here for the guard. I'm here as Lord Subaru's personal knight," Reinhard replied.

Rom frowned. "Lord? Wait is *he* why everyone is looking for Felt?" He growled.

"It's not unrelated," Reinhard admitted. "Subaru sent me here to talk to Felt. It's very important that I find her before the guards do."

Rom glowered at him.

Reinhard heard a sigh. "What do you want?" Felt asked, stepping out from behind a hidden door.

"Miss Felt," Reinhard said with a bow.

"Save it," Felt said with a weary wave. "Why are the guards turning the city upside down looking for me?"

"It's because you took Lady Emilia's insignia," Reinhard explained.

"She got it back!" Felt protested. "What? Does she want blood? It was only jewelry."

"These guards aren't doing Lady Emilia's bidding," Reinhard shook his head. "And the insignia is much more than jewelry. Holding one marks the bearer as qualified to compete in the royal selection to be king."

Felt's eyes widened. "Wait, Emilia is going to be King?"

"Possibly," Reinhard allowed.

"Felt," Rom moaned with his head in his hands. "How many times have I told you not to get mixed up in this kind of business? Big money always means big trouble."

"I didn't realize I was stealing from a potential King," Felt said in dismay.

"Please, listen carefully, Miss Felt, we don't have much time. Lady Emilia is trying to save her people from a horrible curse. To do so she must become King or at least gain access to the Sacred Dragon Blood that only the royalty of Lagunica possess. However, her claim has been jeopardized because the Sages' Council is aware when any hands other than the appointed bearer touch the insignia. The Council knows that you and Lord Subaru held her insignia and that is enough to disqualify her from consideration."

Felt's eyes widened. "I didn't mean to cause that!"

"I know," Reinhard said calmly, "And Subaru and Emilia forgive you. However, they are both trapped in a tight pinch because of you and they need your help."

Felt bit her lower lip and debated for a moment. "What do they need?" She asked finally.

"Felt," Rom objected in a low voice.

"We owe them, Gramps!" Felt said with sigh. "If they hadn't come to find us, do you really think the Bowel Hunter would have just taken the insignia and left? I think she would have stuck around long enough to play with us. We both would have died!"

Rom glowered but he didn't say anything.

"The only way to allow Lady Emilia to continue in the selection is to clarify that the insignia never left her control. Unfortunately, Lord Subaru has also acquired an insignia and that complicates things."

"*Subaru* is a potential king?" Felt asked incredulously.

"There goes the kingdom," Rom muttered, taking a drink.

"Yes," Reinhard said. "And that means he is unable to join Lady Emilia's camp."

"So what's going to happen?" Felt asked.

"Subaru has... *stated* that you joined his camp before you touched the insignia," Reinhard said awkwardly.

"Yes, I remember that event. The event happened exactly as you described," Felt said woodenly. She blinked. "So what does it mean to be in someone's camp?"

"It means that you support his right to be king," Reinhard explained.

"The Gods know that we don't have much to lose no matter who becomes King," Felt shrugged. "But how does that get around us touching the insignia if we're not part of Emilia's camp?"

Reinhard coughed. "To create a loophole in this situation, Lord Subaru is... *stating* that before you took the insignia, he asked Lady Emilia to marry him."

Felt laughed. "Go for it, Subaru!"

"So the guards are looking for you to see if you can confirm or deny Lord Subaru and Lady Emilia's claims," Reinhard concluded.

"So all I have to do is tell them that I knew Subaru and Emilia were engaged and that I agreed to support Subaru and the guards will go away?" Felt asked.

"That is the hope," Reinhard replied.

"And how does this benefit Felt?" Rom asked.

Reinhard looked up at the towering old man. "Subaru tried to get you both out of the slums. He told me before I left that one of the reasons he wants to recruit the two of you is because he was hoping that you will help him get *everyone* out of here."

Felt's eyes widened.

"Is he a liar, crazy, or stupid?" Rom asked seriously.

Reinhard's eyes narrowed. "Be cautious in how you speak of one who has earned my profound respect, Master Rom. Regardless, I am convinced that Lord Subaru means what he says. He might well fail but he is resolved to try and that's more than most would do," Reinhard said, staring directly into the giant's eyes.

Rom snorted but nodded his head.

"Well, what you're asking sounds easy enough," Felt shrugged. "Can't act like I don't owe them one. I'm really good at coming up with alibis, you know."

Rom looked grim but he didn't say anything. Rom craned his neck and peered out the door. "You'll get a chance to perform soon, Felt. Some guards are coming this way."

Reinhard put his hand over his heart. "Don't worry, Miss Felt. I'll be at your side throughout this ordeal. As you are a member of my lord's camp, I am sworn to your safety."

"No," Felt said dismissively.

Reinhard blinked. "Excuse me?" He said in confusion.

"You being here screams collusion," Rom grumbled. "You might as well have Felt tell the truth if you're going to stand next to her while she talks. No one would believe her anyway."

"Gramps is right, you need to go," Felt said.

"I can't simply leave you here," Reinhard protested.

Felt sighed in exasperation and seized Reinhard by the hand. She dragged him over to the hidden door she had emerged from. "Stay in here and stay quiet!" She ordered.

Reinhard took a breath and nodded. "You have but to summon me at your need. No matter what occurs," He said firmly.

Felt held his gaze a moment and then nodded before closing the door.

Reinhard could see out into the tavern main room through a narrow slit and he sat down trying to be as quiet as possible. Felt moved behind the bar and acted like she was cleaning up as three guards entered the tavern. Reinhard's eyes narrowed. Two of these guards were his father Heikel and his lapdog Fein.

"Are you, Felt?" Heikel asked without preamble.

"Sure am!" She said cheerfully. "Here for a drink? It's the best in Lowtown!" Reinhard watched Rom continued to wipe up the bar. If nothing else the massive giant would make the guards a little more polite.

Heikel hesitated but Reinhard knew only too well that his father had never turned down a drink. He wasn't sure if Felt knew that or if she had just gotten lucky.

Felt poured the bottle into a small glass and Heikel downed it in one shot. Then his face turned red and he started to choke. Fein pounded on his back.

Reinhard was slightly impressed. He'd never seen his father react this way to alcohol.

"What is that poison?" Heikel demanded in a hoarse voice.

"Poison?" Felt asked in surprise. "That's Rom's own brew. Best stuff south of the market district," She held out her hand. "Three coppers please?"

Heikel looked ready to refuse but then he snorted and dropped the coins in Felt's hand.

"So," Heikel said, leaning on the bar. "You probably don't see many nobles down here."

"Not many," Felt agreed. "But there were two the other day."

"Two?" Heikel asked in a low tone.

"Subaru and Emilia. They wanted me to show them around the slums. They asked if I'd help them figure out a way to clean up the area," Felt explained.

Heikel glowered for a moment. "Did they tell you what their relationship was?"

Felt snorted. "It was hard to miss! Those two were sickening! 'I love you, Emilia,' 'I worship you, Emilia,' 'I can't wait for our wedding day, Emilia.' Was she the first woman he'd ever met?"

Heikel drummed his fingers on the bar. Reinhard knew the look on his father's face. It didn't bode well.

"You're a slum child," Heikel said in an insulting tone. "You live down here eating dirt and drinking dust."

"I see you're familiar with my life story," Felt said with a wry smile.

"The nobles ignore you and abuse you so you ignore and abuse them right back. You don't have any interest in politics, do you?"

"I sure didn't. Until I met Subaru and Emilia that is," She added. "They said they were going to try to get everyone out of the slums. I'm totally down to help with that. They even gave me some money so I could get out of here and try to make a real life for myself while we're doing it! This is the first time I've ever gotten involved in anything. I think I'm excited!"

Heikel glared at Felt. "Well, I think you're a lying little bitch."

Felt blinked and pointed at herself. "Me?" Her large red eyes were a study of total innocence.

Heikel snorted. "Maybe we should take a walk together. See if I can sharpen your memory."

Heikel reached across the bar for her but Rom was suddenly in between them wiping the bar right in front of where Heikel stood. His expression was blank but still intimidating.

Heikel stepped back and reached for his sword hilt. Reinhard prepared to intervene, desperately trying not to think about the long term consequences of threatening his own father, but Fein grabbed Heikel's hand.

"Don't!" Fein whispered.

Heikel whirled on him in a fury.

"Boss, you can't just rough up a member of a royal faction!" Fein hissed.

"Even if that idiot kid that Reinhard is watching *is* a royal candidate, something I doubt you could successfully argue, you can't tell me that he would care enough about this dust rat to do anything about it! And even if he did complain who would care?" Heikel spat.

"Wake up, boss! He'd make a complaint to the Sages' Council!" Fein explained as if speaking to a child. "The Sages' Council has hated you for years! If they're given an excuse to get rid of you, they won't *care* who made the complaint!"

Heikel made a fist, staring at Felt for a long moment. Finally he shook his head. "You are both called to the palace tomorrow at one hour past sun's downing to give testimony. Fail to appear and I will drag you in myself," He snarled.

"Thank you, come again!" Felt said cheerfully.

"Don't get too cocky, dust rat." Fein smirked, "One day I'll meet you alone late at night. Just one more pretty little girl gone missing from the slum."

The three turned around and stalked out of the tavern.

Reinhard sat still and waited. A minute or two passed and then Felt came to the door and let him out.

"Pretty good, right?" Felt asked with a smile.

"That was obscene!" Reinhard said with heat.

Felt blinked. "Well, excuse me!" She said, sounding offended.

"Not you, them! Guards threatening innocent civilians? Nearly drawing a weapon on an unarmed girl? Disgusting! This is an affront to every true knight in the kingdom!" Reinhard snarled.

Felt folded her arms across her chest. "You don't come down here much, do you?" Felt asked in an amused tone.

"No, I rarely have the need," Reinhard admitted.

"That was nothing. Fein wasn't joking about making girls disappear. Most of the guards down here have a bad reputation," Felt said.

Reinhard's jaw dropped. He could tell that Felt wasn't lying but the thought of the guard... of qualified knights acting like this with impunity shook his world to its foundation.

"So we need to go to the castle tomorrow right?" Felt asked.

Reinhard nodded. "Yes. And this time I will be with you. I have also been summoned to give testimony. No one will dare threaten either of you. You have my word," Reinhard said firmly.

Felt flushed a little. "Well, thanks. Are you going to head home now?"

Reinhard flinched. "I thought perhaps I would remain here tonight if it wouldn't be an imposition."

Felt smirked. "Don't worry about it, Reinhard. Gramps and me can take care of ourselves."

"You never what could happen. You might encounter other threats. I'd prefer not to leave you alone tonight."

Felt squinted at him. "OK, what's really going on? You have an estate in this city. Why the hell would you want to sleep here instead?"

Reinhard flushed. "I'd rather avoid the estate currently," He admitted.

"Why?" Felt challenged.

Reinhard sighed. "The man who questioned you... is my father."

Reinhard expected that Felt would explode at him and kick him out but instead her eyes just narrowed a bit.

"I suppose I can dig up another sleeping pallet. Assuming you don't mind Gramps's snoring," Felt said, walking away nonchalantly.

Reinhard found himself following her with a smile.

Emilia and Subaru had searched through the library for most of the day. They'd gotten a vague idea of how the royal selection would work but a lot of details remained fuzzy and that made it hard for them to make plans.

After sunset, Emilia stepped outside to speak with the spirits and Subaru decided to go wandering to give her time to do so properly.

On a whim, he decided to look for Beatrice and triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Subaru had to search two floors with *Reason and Judgment* before he found the special door. He opened it and found Beatrice seated on a stool, reading a book almost as big as she was.

"Hm. Why would you come back to Betty's library, I suppose?" She asked, not bothering to look at him.

Subaru stepped inside and sat down, leaning against the wall.

"I don't know," Subaru said. "I felt like we got off on the wrong foot so I figured I'd see if we could be friends."

"Betty doesn't have friends, I suppose," Beatrice sniffed at him dismissively.

"Well, that sounds kind of lonely," Subaru observed.

Beatrice stiffened and then glowered at him from over the top of the book.

Subaru shrugged. "Hey, you said it, I didn't!" He said matter-of-fact.

Beatrice slammed the book shut with an audible thump. Subaru tried not to flinch at the sound. Beatrice, being Puck's sister, could likely very easily 'thump' him as well. "What is it that you want, I suppose?"

Subaru scratched his chin. "I don't really *want* anything from you. I just thought we could be friends."

Beatrice stared at him for a long moment. "Are you *that* person?"

Subaru frowned in confusion. "Um. I don't know. Who is *that* person?"

Beatrice sniffed and opened her book again. "You are not *that* person."

"OK," Subaru said agreeably. "That's fine. Just out of curious who is *that* person? And how would you recognized them if you met them?"

Beatrice slammed her book shut again and glared at Subaru. She raised her hand and sent him flying out of the library with a great gust of wind. Subaru barely activated *Indomitable* before he crashed into the opposing wall.

Subaru looked up and saw that the library was gone. He looked behind him and saw huge cracks in the wall, radiating out from his point of impact.

Subaru rubbed his head uncomfortably, wondering what would have happened if he hadn't triggered *Indomitable* when he did.

"Well, that seemed like a bit of an overreaction," Subaru muttered to no one.

The next morning, Roswaal left for the capitol shortly after breakfast. Subaru watched him literally shoot up into the sky and fly off. It was a memorable way to start the day.

Emilia was going to do a bit more research today. They'd come up with some ideas for the selection but Roswaal hadn't had time to discuss them before he left so Emilia was planning to spend more time reading about the selection. Subaru wouldn't be very helpful in this regard but he was planning to spend the morning in the library with Emilia. That way she could at least discuss her findings with someone.

However, a chance encounter during their walk to the library changed his plans.

"Sister, I will be unable to accompany you to Arlam to get supplies today," Ram informed her. "Lord Roswaal is expecting an important delivery and I must be here to receive it."

"That is not an issue," Rem said calmly. "I will manage on my own."

"Would you like another pair of hands?" Subaru offered. "I can help you move supplies."

Rem turned and looked at him. Her gaze wasn't as hostile as the other night but there was no friendliness in it.

"Good idea," Ram interjected. "This way you will at least have been of some use during your stay."

"Hey, that's mean," Subaru whined to Ram.

Rem looked at Ram as if to object but simply bowed her head and walked away. She didn't look back to see if Subaru was following her.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, looking nervous. "Are you sure about this? Rem tried to kill you. You'll be all alone with her."

"I can take care of myself, Mili," Subaru said with a cocky grin.

I hope.

"Besides, if I'm going to be around here for any amount of time, I'll need to make peace with Rem. If I want to earn her trust, I need to extend my own," Subaru explained.

Emilia did not look convinced but she nodded and Subaru gave her a brief hug before hurrying after Rem who was already attaching an earth dragon to a small wagon in the stable.

"Need any help?" Subaru asked.

Rem did not respond so Subaru simply sat down in the passenger seat and waited.

Rem finished her preparations and then sat down beside Subaru without looking at him. She took the reins and the wagon rolled out of the stable and began trundling down the road.

Subaru sat there patiently while the first mile of the trip passed in silence.

"So," He finally said. "I guess we're not talking?"

"I have nothing to say to you," Rem replied calmly.

"Not even an 'I'm sorry I tried to crush your skull the other day?'" Subaru asked.

"Did you come on this journey to get revenge?" Rem asked, sounding as if she was inquiring about the weather.

"Yes. I'm going to torment you with annoying blather during every passing mile," Subaru yawned. "Mwa ha ha. My evil plan is coming together perfectly."

"You are not fooling me," Rem said. "I am well aware that you are a Witch Cultist."

"No, you *think* I'm a Witch Cultist. You are not *aware* that I am a Witch Cultist because I'm not and you can't be aware of a delusion," Subaru replied.

"Whatever your plan is for my sister and Miss Emilia, I will stop you."

"My only plans involve helping Emilia. You and your sister don't feature in any of my plans," Subaru said.

"Then you plan to get rid of me?" Rem asked calmly.

Subaru sighed. "Sure, Rem. That's exactly what I'm doing. I made sure everyone knows that I'm taking a trip alone with you so I could put you out of the way. What would I say when I go back to the manor without you? When Ram asks 'Subaru, where is Rem,' what do you suggest I say? 'Who's Rem?'"

"You are not nearly as funny as you think you are."

"And you're not nearly as intimidating. I could have shattered your skull last night instead of just disarming you,"

Subaru replied, getting frustrated. The thought of intentionally breaking another human being's head made Subaru cringe but the point was still valid. Honestly, it was a minor miracle that he hadn't killed Rem last night completely by accident. "If I'm so evil, why didn't I kill you?"

"Because you knew it would make people suspect you," Rem replied.

"Suspect me of what?" Subaru laughed. "I didn't sneak into your room looking for you. You came looking for me in the dead of night and attacked me with a morning star right outside my bedroom door. In what scenario would killing you have not looked like self-defense? What, do you think they'd conclude that I lured you to my bed and you just happened to bring your mace along and then I killed you? What would have made *anyone* think that I was the bad guy in this situation?"

"You must have thought of something or you would have killed me," Rem replied.

"Or, and I'm just spit balling here, maybe I don't like killing people. I'm just saying, it's a theory," Subaru said.

"You are a Witch Cultist."

"And our conversation starts over again from the beginning," Subaru sighed.

While Rem negotiated with the shop keeper, Subaru played with the kids; especially Petra and Meili. The boys seemed more interested in Subaru now that the amazing Sword Saint wasn't around. They were especially interested in jumping on him and driving him to the ground.

It was a good thing Subaru was paying attention to the shop and noticed when it was time to start loading the supplies because Rem had no intention of informing him.

I wonder if she would tell me when it was time to go back to the manor or if she would have just left me here without a word.

Subaru was impressed by Rem's strength and, just to keep pace, he tried triggering *Indomitable*. Unfortunately, Subaru quickly discovered that it didn't actually enhance his strength. It might let him hit far harder than he should be able to but this didn't translate into the ability to lift heavy loads. Subaru wasn't sure he understood the distinction and right now he decided not to worry about it.

After they finished loading the wagon, Subaru paused to say a final farewell to all the children.

Subaru then had to run after the wagon as Rem pulled away from the store without him.

I guess that answers whether or not Rem would warn me that she was leaving. Subaru thought as he struggled to haul himself into the moving wagon.

Rem didn't even look in his direction.

"Thanks for waiting for me, Rem. I really appreciate it," Subaru grumbled.

"Why should I want you to be at my home?" Rem asked.

Subaru sighed. He guessed trying to earn Rem's friendship was a pipe dream. He would have accomplished more today if he'd gone to the library with Emilia and volunteered to be her chair.

Actually, that sounds kind of like fun! Subaru mused.

As the wagon trundled slowly up the road Subaru began to hear something. It sounded like someone calling his name.

"Rem, stop," Subaru said, trying to listen.

Rem ignored him.

Subaru grabbed the reins and pulled hard. "Stop!" He yelled, bringing the carriage to a halt.

Rem glared at him.

"Listen!" He hissed.

"Subaru!" A faint voice yelled from behind them.

Subaru and Rem turned around and saw Petra running up the road looking exhausted.

"Petra!" Subaru jumped out of the cart and ran over to her. "What's wrong?"

"Gusteko soldiers!" She said almost falling into Subaru's arms. "They're capturing everyone! I think they're going to kill them!" Petra's body trembled from exhaustion. "I need to find Lord Roswaal!"

"Roswaal isn't here," Subaru said with a sinking feeling in his stomach. "He went to the capitol this morning."

Petra's face twisted in newfound terror.

"Calm down, Petra. We'll help," Subaru said.

Oh good. How the hell do you plan to pull that promise off?

"Rem, we need to go back to Arlem," Subaru told her.

"When did you have time to set this incident up?" Rem asked Subaru. "Are these soldiers Witch Cultists in disguise?"

Subaru glared at Rem. For a moment, Subaru almost regretted not killing her last night. "Rem. If you're not going to help, then go back to the manor and tell Ram and Emilia what's going on. Or don't. I can't make you do anything," Subaru spat.

He turned to Petra. "Come on. Let's go back to Arlem," He put the exhausted Petra on his shoulders and took off at a jog.

"But without Lord Roswaal, what can we do?" Petra asked.

"We'll think of something!" Subaru yelled back.

I hope.

Subaru didn't look back at Rem as he ran away or he would have seen her face briefly crease in doubt before she started driving the wagon back to the manor.

Subaru and Petra crept through the bushes near Arlem. The villagers were all tied up in the village square and a troop of at least forty soldiers were mocking them as they set up small wooden stakes. It looked like they were going to decorate those stakes with heads. Towering over the soldiers was a one-eyed giant that stood at least twenty feet tall.

"What the hell is that thing?" Subaru asked in a whisper.

"I think it's a troll," Petra whispered.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and scanned the soldiers.

Hm. The captain appears to be the tall blond one with the scar on his cheek. The soldiers are well armed but they appear to have no ranged weapons. That might be useful to know.

Subaru left the frozen moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my men and I are here to bring the fond greetings of Gusteko to our dear friends in the south," The captain proclaimed. "It is our fervent hope that small get-togethers like this will lead to a new spirit of cooperation between our nations and provide the Dragon Kingdom of Lagunica a reminder of how much we value our southern neighbors. We look forward to establishing closer ties with the kingdom in the near future. Much closer. But in the meantime we are proud to leave the kingdom a gift to remind them of our fond feelings," The captain ended with a smirk.

The soldiers laughed.

Oh great. How the hell do I handle this? There's forty of them, plus a giant troll, and one of me. My magic lets me be invulnerable for five seconds and then I'm a pane of glass for thirty. Maybe I could ask them to give me breaks in between fights?

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* again.

Hm. Normally I'd be feeling supremely confident right now. But I suppose reality is intruding on that.

Look at it logically, Subaru. He thought to himself, The bad news is that you can't win this fight. The good news is that you don't need to win this fight. If they know that Indomitable only lasts five seconds, you're dead. But they don't know that. They're not going to see a scared little boy pulling a massive bluff. They're going to see an invincible juggernaut pronouncing their doom.

Subaru, these soldiers are playing for the same stakes as you: their lives. They're loving going after unarmed women and children. Show the soldiers that they can die as effortlessly as the villagers and those soldiers will start having long gloomy thoughts about mortality. They will hesitate. They will try to plan and strategize. No one wants to attack a deadly opponent whose capabilities are a complete mystery.

This is the exact same bluff you pulled on those thugs the other day. In some ways, this time you're better off because you have Indomitable now. All you have to do is frighten them. Position yourself so only one of them is going to attack you at first. Then prove how dangerous you can be.

It's all about confidence. About machismo. Keep triggering Reason and Judgment to keep the confidence flowing.

If you need more convincing, imagine how backing down here would affect the royal selection. You want people to make you King? Or to make Emilia King? Well, a King has responsibilities. First and foremost among those responsibilities is to protect his people. If this massacre happens, good luck convincing anyone that you can keep the people safe. You couldn't even protect a small village within walking distance of your house.

Subaru ended *Reason and Judgment*.

Is this really the best plan that I can come up with? Bluff them and hope that they hesitate?

Well yeah, they might hesitate. They might also laugh at me and chop off my head before I can blink.

This is a crazy idea, do I really want to do this? This has got to be a thousand to one shot.

Subaru looked at little Petra who was staring up at him with wide crying eyes; desperately hoping that Subaru could do something, anything to help her family.

Shit. Right now, I'd give a mountain of gold for Petra to look just a little less adorable and helpless. It's not like I can just tell her 'There's nothing I can do,' and make her watch her family die. I really am such an idiot.

"Petra," Subaru whispered. "I have a plan. Wait here. If I get... killed," Subaru choked a little on that word. "Go up to the manor and look for Emilia. She can help you."

Petra nodded.

Subaru took a deep breath.

Damn. Wish I had kissed Emilia while I had the chance. Now I'll never know what her lips feel like.

Subaru marched out of the woods boldly and with purpose. He walked as if he thought of the soldiers as ants.

OK, Subaru; bluff. Bluff like you have never bluffed before. Be one of those shonen protagonists who only lets enemies exist because they give him something to fight.

Try to be the Subaru you are inside Reason and Judgment's frozen moment. You are fearless. You can handle anything. These human insects deserve to be punished simply for wasting your valuable time.

Keep stepping in and out of Reason and Judgment. Keep the confidence coming.

The soldiers saw him walking toward them and laughed. Their laughing faltered as he kept approaching them, some warning instinct telling them that anyone who was not afraid of a clearly powerful foe might be more than he seemed.

Subaru continued to approach until he was almost close enough to touch them. "I am the great Lord Subaru Natsuki," He proclaimed. "But please, call me Subaru."

The soldiers seemed baffled.

"I have something of a relationship with these villagers," Subaru continued.

The captain snickered. "Have you come to beg for their lives or just yours?"

"I'm afraid you misunderstand me," Subaru corrected with a faint smile.

Petra was watching wide eyed from the bushes. Mister Subaru was so brave. He wasn't afraid of those wicked soldiers at all.

Petra almost screamed when the bush near her was disturbed until she saw it was Miss Rem and Miss Ram. They were accompanied by a pretty girl dressed all in white. Miss Rem was carrying a morning star.

"What is going on here?" Miss Ram whispered.

"Subaru is going to save my family. He said he had a plan," Petra said with a child's confidence.

Ram peered through the bushes and saw Subaru standing there unarmed, surrounded by forty men and a giant troll.

"He's either crazy or a fool," She muttered.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered.

Subaru made his face go cold. "I overheard you talking with the villagers. You really have a lot of balls, don't you? I devote my precious time and energy to protecting these people and you brazenly declare your intent to massacre them. I can't imagine anything more offensive."

The soldiers all looked confused by this statement.

Subaru pointed at the ground directly in front of him. "Prostrate before me and beg my mercy. Do this and I shall offer you a quick death. But," Subaru took a step closer to the soldiers. He was now inside the group and he deliberately placed himself next to the biggest soldier. He was a giant like Rom but this man was young and wearing full armor. "If you refuse my magnanimous generosity, I swear here and now that you will all die slowly and painfully."

Subaru spoke with such conviction that the captain blanched but he quickly recovered himself and looked angry.

"Kill this fool!" The captain ordered.

The Rom sized soldier drew his sword and swung at Subaru's face.

Subaru activated *Indomitable* and caught the blade in his bare hand.

The soldiers all gaped in astonishment.

"Didn't you hear me?" Subaru asked quietly. He pulled back his fist and punched the Rom-sized soldier in the chest. The armored giant almost exploded and went flying back like speeding train, smashing into eight other soldiers and driving them to the ground. The eight soldiers' screams of pain cut off abruptly. They lay beneath the giant's corpse their armor broken and crushed. They were no longer injured and bleeding humans but smashed corpses leaking fluids all over the village square. The giant's corpse was by far the worst. His torso had all but been ripped in half vertically by the force of the blow. If he'd been struck any harder his, body would have been torn apart.

Oh my god. I killed them. Oh my god! I killed them! Holy shit, his blood is on my face! Subaru wiped it off quickly. Oh God. What's that pink glop on my hands? Never mind! Don't think about it! Keep playing the part! Sell the bluff! They're scared! Keep them scared! Later on, you can go back to the manor and curl up in a ball and cry like a little girl. Right now, sell the bluff! Twenty five seconds until I can trigger Indomitable again!

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* bringing the world to a halt.

Stop it! That is enough, Subaru! Subaru's own thoughts cracked inside his mind like a whip. Enough sniveling about weeping and crying. You are better than that. You are not the same loser that you were back home. These fools are all terrified. He who gives into fear is lost. And they should fear you. They have crossed the great Lord Subaru Natsuki and that is always the shortest path to the grave. Keep going. Teach these fools the meaning of fear!

Subaru restarted time.

"I told you to offer up your lives to me without resisting," Subaru growled. "By the time I'm done with you, you'll all wish you had listened!" He roared.

"What is this?" A soldier demanded.

"It's a trick! It has to be!" Another cried.

Subaru spread his arms as if preparing a spell and the soldiers cringed.

Eighteen seconds!

"Why did you worms come here? Were you simply ignorant of the fact that this land is under *my* protection or was it your intent to insult me!" Subaru demanded.

Ten seconds!

Subaru shook his head. "It matters not," He proclaimed. "Arrogance or ignorance might explain your actions but nothing shall ever forgive them! You came to this land bringing blood and death and you shall atone for your foolishness!" Subaru roared.

Ready!

The captain was trembling. "Gruu!" He yelled at the troll. "Attack!"

The massive troll stomped forward, holding a massive double-sided axe. The blades were each bigger than wagon wheels and haft was probably fashioned from a whole tree. The drooling troll grinned at Subaru, probably too stupid or too well-trained to even wonder if following the captain's orders was wise.

The troll raised its monstrous axe high over its head and swung it down in a blow like a thunder bolt.

Subaru caught the axe blade in one hand.

The soldiers gave a collective gasp. The troll looked puzzled and bent down closer to Subaru as if to investigate. "Oh my. I suppose I really should fight back," Subaru mused.

Subaru punched the axe and it flew out of the trolls hands embedding itself in the troll's skull and nearly bisecting it.

The troll's roar of pain trailed off in a whimper as it staggered back a step and crashed down ontop of the nearby soldiers crushing several.

About twenty five soldiers left. Still hopeless if I lose control of this situation. Twenty five seconds until I can use Indomitable again.

"So," Subaru asked conversationally. "Do you have any other trump cards left to play?"

He paused and let the soldiers stammer and argue among themselves. *Reason and Judgment's* confidence was fading rapidly.

Hang in there Subaru! Focus on the captain. Don't look at the blood and gore and the shattered... bodies... Focus! They're scared. Keep them scared. You can freak out later. Just don't start screaming.

Seventeen seconds left.

"Well," Subaru sighed. "If you're truly out of means to entertain me, I suppose it's time to finish this. You came here for

a massacre. You'll get one," Subaru promised grimly.

Eight seconds.

"Wait!" The captain said, putting up his hands.

"Hm?" Subaru raised an eyebrow.

"Forgive me, Lord Subaru!" The captain begged. "Spare my life! Kill my troops if you wish but spare me!"

What a piece of shit! Subaru thought grimly. Doesn't look like his troops are too happy about that offer either. Then again, sparing him is probably a good idea. If I took him as a captive I bet he knows a lot about what Gusteko is planning. We'd know if more attacks are coming...

Indomitable is ready!

"I'll tell you what, Captain," Subaru said after a moment's thought. "Your words have moved me to such an extent that I'm prepared to offer you and your men a deal."

A desperate hope flamed in the captain's eyes. "Of course, Lord Subaru! I'll give you anything, anything you wish, just name it! I will do whatever it takes to appease you!"

"Splendid," Subaru replied with a grim smile. "Here is my offer, soldiers: Surrender your captain as my prisoner, and I will spare your lives."

"Wait, what?!" The captain squawked.

"That is my offer, Captain. I was originally going to kill all of you. But I am the great lord Subaru Natsuki and my benevolence knows no bounds. Offer me your life and I will spare twenty others. Truly, this would be a sacrifice worthy of a great leader, would it not?"

The captain staggered back in terror, drawing his sword. "Don't you come near me! Rush him, men!" He ordered.

The other soldiers didn't move.

The captain snarled at his troops. "What are you-"

A heavy blow hit the captain's head from behind and another soldier wrenched his sword away. A moment later the captain was trussed up just like the villagers.

"Our captain, great one!" One of the soldiers said with a cringingly respectful tone. The soldiers were all standing well away from the tied up captain.

OK. Almost done. Big finish now. Sell the bluff today and hopefully you won't need to prove it again anytime soon. That's going to be valuable to you. Be Subaru Natsuki the Invincible. Then you can go back to the manor and scream until you pass out.

"A fine gift," Subaru commented on the bound captain.

"Let me go, you idiots! I'll see you all hanged for this!" The captain thrashed.

Oh god. There is a literal pool of blood spreading across the square. I'm about to have a nervous breakdown. Can I just like stop this now? I'm freaking out. I think I'm going to cry. Or throw up. Or I need to use the bathroom. Possibly all three at once. I need to end this quick.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Actually, is a little gore really worth getting worked up over? Subaru sighed to himself. Granted, the corpses and blood are disgusting but is it really that much worse than any other rotten meat you've ever seen? Man's horror at a human corpse is because he sees himself in that corpse. You have absolutely nothing in common with these fools. There is no comparison to be made with those bodies. These deaths should trouble you no more than crushing an annoying fly.

Subaru deactivated *Reason and Judgment* and time resumed.

"Tell me, do you plan to see this offering delivered to me, or must I fetch it for myself?" Subaru said with an edge in his voice.

Two of the soldiers went pale and they looked at each other in terror. They each swallowed hard and grabbed hold of their captain. They dragged him up to Subaru and dropped him at Subaru's feet. The soldiers then leapt away, panting. The captain rolled around on the ground screaming incoherently but unable to move anywhere.

"Wonderful," Subaru said grandly. "Your offering has pleased me and in consideration of your obedience, I shall spare your lives."

The soldiers all looked relieved as they stood there panting for breath.

Subaru raised an eyebrow. "Why are you all still here?" He asked.

The soldiers looked at each other and then took off running and screaming.

Subaru stepped around a house to watch the soldiers escape and to ensure they didn't try to circle back.

Wow. For guys in full armor, they sure can run fast. Oh God. Am I standing in blood? No, don't look down. I don't want to know for sure. I am going to scream... I am... I am OK. At least for another few minutes.

Subaru heard running footsteps behind him and spun around but it was only Petra. She ran to her tied up Mom and embraced her tightly. "Momma!" She wailed.

Subaru smiled at Petra who was embracing her mother. It helped put the mountain of carnage rotting nearby out of his mind. He reached down and plucked a dagger from the bound captain's belt. Then he walked over to the Village chief who was bound and gagged nearby.

The Chief's eyes grew wide as hen's eggs and he began to thrash in his bonds. Subaru realized somewhat belatedly that the chief thought he was about to be tortured.

"One moment," Subaru muttered to him as he began slicing his bonds. *"One moment,"* Subaru said in frustration as the struggling Chieftain refused to stay still. Eventually, Subaru managed to cut through the last of the ropes.

The Chief tore off his gag and jumped to his feet, staring wide eyed at Subaru and panting heavily.

Subaru reversed the knife in his hand and offered it, hilt first to the Chief.

In spite of being presented with the hilt, the Chief still cringed when it came near him. "Chief, would you be so kind as to help me release your people?" Subaru asked mildly.

The Chief blinked and stared at Subaru for a long moment. It finally penetrated his thick head that he was being rescued not being dragged off to torture and death. The chief quickly took the knife, bowing and making incoherent words of gratitude before starting to free the other villagers.

"Subaru!" Emilia's voice came from behind him.

He turned around just in time for Emilia to throw her arms around him and bury her face in his shoulder.

"I was so scared," Emilia whimpered.

"Yeah," Subaru said, rubbing her back. "Me too."

"You dummy," Emilia whispered.

Subaru was nearing complete exhaustion. His tears, and various other fluids, threatened to break loose but he suppressed them through sheer will power.

Just a few more minutes. A few more minutes and we can all go back to the manor and I can scream and cry and throw up in private. This is important to the royal selection. You need to establish who Lord Subaru is. He can't be some pussy who cries after a battle. Not if you want to have any chance of getting the blood for Mili.

Subaru looked over Emilia's shoulder and saw Rem and Ram standing there.

The twins never show much emotion and they're certainly hard to read but it feels like Ram is actually impressed. Rem looks like she's doubting herself and her theory about me and that cult. That's a huge improvement compared to her previous absolute certainty that I deserved to die. Maybe I can take advantage of her doubts to make a small connection with her.

"Rem, would you do me a favor?" Subaru asked, still holding Emilia against him.

The blue haired maid hesitated. Rem didn't respond but she did look at him questioningly. Subaru took that as a very good sign.

"Would you watch him?" Subaru said, pointing at the tied up Captain who was slowly trying to inchworm his way out of the village. "I want to make sure he stays alive and intact until we can question him."

Rem nodded and walked over to the Captain who saw her coming but had no hope of escape. Rem grabbed the captain by the legs and casually dragged him on his face back to the middle of the square. She then dropped him and pinned him down with a stomp that made the Captain howl in pain.

"Lord Subaru," The Village chief said.

Subaru finally separated from Emilia and turned to face the Village Chief.

Emilia slipped her hand into his.

The entire village was on their knees before him, faces down and both palms pressed into the earth. "Lord Subaru," The Village Chief continued. "We all owe you our lives. You have our village's eternal gratitude for your selfless heroism," The chief paused. "I bitterly regret my treatment of you-"

"Think nothing of it, Chief," Subaru said dismissively. He knew what the chief was going to say. "I was traveling incognito by design. I wanted to see how people really lived out here so I would discover how best to help them. I even brought along the Sword Saint as a distraction. You ignored me just as I wished you to, so an apology is not necessary."

Hey, that's actually a pretty good story. Wonder if anyone buys it?

Emilia was looking at him in wonder and Subaru ruefully realized that he had convinced of his lie the one person that he didn't want to lie to.

Subaru saw the villagers still kneeling and belatedly realized they were waiting for him.

"Please, rise," Subaru said, trying to sound both lordly and kindly at the same time.

God, I hope this won't take much longer. I can feel my hands shaking. I really need to get somewhere I can freak out! Why the fuck am I the only one freaking out in the first place? All of these villagers almost died just now and the village looks like a slaughterhouse. Am I really the only one being affected by all this?

The villagers got to their feet, all of them looking at Subaru in awe.

"Lord Subaru, you will forever have our village's loyalty. It was Lord Roswaal's responsibility to protect our village but since he has been derelict-"

Subaru heard a hiss from behind him and recognized Ram's voice.

Oh, crap. I better head this off or Ram will totally blame me for the village's divided loyalty even if I didn't do anything to encourage it!

"Apologies, good Chief but I fear you are misinformed," Subaru said. "Lord Roswaal is currently in the capitol on urgent business related to the royal selection. He left me to ensure the safety of the region in his absence."

Not technically true but it ought to get Roswaal out of trouble and prevent Ram from poisoning me, Subaru thought.

"If there is blame to be had, it is mine and mine alone," Subaru said. "If I had suspected that these knaves would try to cross the border and seek to make mischief in the region, I would have been watching much more closely. As it is, I am grateful to have been able to come to your rescue in time."

Talking this hyper formal way is actually kind of fun! I think could get used to it. I know I sound kind of silly but the villagers seem to be lapping it up!

"The true hero of the day is Petra," Subaru said, glancing at her. "She managed to get away from the village and came to find help. That was clever thinking, Petra."

Petra went bright red and buried her face in her mother's apron.

Well I was trying to be nice, Subaru thought.

"We should be getting back to the manor soon," Subaru said. "I need to ensure that there has been no trouble anywhere else. However, before we depart, I would ask you for a service, if you're willing, Chieftain."

"Anything you ask for is yours, my lord," The chief said with a low bow.

"Do you have any means of sending messages rapidly to the capitol?" Subaru asked.

"There is a guard outpost an hour from here by earth dragon," The chieftain said. "They have magical means of sending priority messages to the capital instantaneously."

"Splendid," Subaru replied.

OK, talking like a lord or whatever you call it may be fun but it's also very draining. Am I almost done?

"I would request that you send an immediate message to the capitol by this means. Inform them that hostile forces from Gusteko have crossed the border with malicious intent and all villages in the north must be made aware of the threat and be vigilant against it."

"Excellent suggestion, my lord," The chief bowed again. "I should have thought of it myself."

"Also," Subaru continued, "I would like you to present this prisoner to the guards. He may have valuable information about his army's future plans."

"It will be done before nightfall," The chief swore.

"One final thing: If possible, would you have the capitol be informed that it was the royal camps of Subaru and Emilia Natsuki who are the ones responsible for repelling this intrusion from the north?"

The village started murmuring in wonder.

"My lord, are you..." The chief trailed off, "Are you a candidate for the throne?" He asked almost in awe.

"Just so!" Subaru exclaimed.

OK, this is the moment! Ham it up, Subaru!

"One day my beautiful bride and I," Emilia turned bright red, "Will reign over this land. As we all know the primary

responsibility of any lord is to ensure that his people may lead peaceful lives; free from want and free from fear. The Lady Emilia and I are proud to have taken the first step in proving that all who show us loyalty need fear no foe! We will hound them to the ends of the world until they sue for peace and leave our people to prosper!"

The village broke out in wild cheers.

Felt sat in the witness chair while five Sages sat behind a tall bench looking down on her. Other palace functionaries and a few important nobles sat in the audience chamber.

Reinhard seldom felt ill but today he was struggling with a painful headache. He and Roswaal had been at the castle all day being questioned, except for a brief interlude when Reinhard had begged to be excused in order to escort Rom and Felt to the palace. He was glad he had insisted on it. On their way to the castle, they had encountered a large group of guards waiting on the only path from the slums. The guards had glowered at Reinhard and grudgingly given way. Reinhard had no evidence that they had meant Felt and Rom harm, else he would have formally challenged them to combat on the spot, but he had his suspicions.

The questioning this day had been entirely circular. Reinhard and Roswaal knew very little about the matter at hand since they had only been present for small moments of it. Thus the questions were repetitious and after a while Reinhard's answers became rote. Rom was briefly questioned and then dismissed.

Now Felt was enduring the same treatment as Reinhard and it was clear she didn't much care for it.

"If you knew that they were engaged, why did you not inform the Sages' council?" Minister Byrd asked.

Reinhard rolled his eyes heavenward. *A ridiculous question if it was meant to be serious*, Reinhard thought, rolling his eyes. *This entire hearing has been absurd. Why would Felt or anyone else have decided they would be obligated to inform the Sages' council of an engagement? My grip on civility is beginning to slip. If I was asked again to provide testimony, answering the same questions for the twentieth time, I would struggle to maintain courtesy. Each time I was asked the same question I had to suppress the urge to make a snide comment.*

Felt, on the other hand: "Who are you?" Felt asked the minister. "What is your position in the kingdom? If I wanted to inform you of *anything* who would I talk to? Where would I go? Do you want to be informed of any marriage I hear about or just the ones involving these two?"

The council grumbled. Reinhard sighed. *Miss Felt's attitude isn't doing Lord Subaru any favors and yet it is hard to blame her for being angry. Several of the sages have done everything but openly accused her of lying. They have no evidence but apparently the ministers do not consider lack of evidence a stumbling block in accusing a commoner of wrongdoing.*

"I think we have heard enough evidence," Minister McMahon said wearily. "Miss... 'Felt,' you may step down."

Felt left the witness stand with relief and sat down in the audience seats next to Reinhard.

"It is time to vote. Minister Dore?" McMahon called.

"I see no evidence that contradicts the camps' claims. In the absent of any clear and convincing evidence, I vote that the Emilia camp be permitted to continue."

"Thank you, Minister Dore. Minister Byrd?"

"Even taking this case in the manner most favorable to the Emilia camp, her argument does not hold water. It is *marriage* that joins interests, not mere engagement. The fact that they were engaged at the time Subaru Natsuki had custody of her insignia is irrelevant. I vote that the Emilia camp be disbanded."

"Thank you, Minister Byrd," McMahon sighed. "Minister Choi?"

"I must disagree with my esteemed colleague. This council has ruled several times that engagement *can* represent unity of interests. This is the precedent that the Emilia camp cites and we should all follow it," Choi said.

"Those incidents were decided based on political expediency, not on good law!" Byrd objected.

"They are precedent regardless and we, as keepers of the law, are required to respect and uphold them regardless of if we think they were wrongly decided. Due to this, I vote that the Emilia camp be permitted to continue."

"Thank you, Minister Choi," McMahon yawned. "Minister Agart?"

"This entire situation is ridiculous and the witnesses have assembled here to regale us under oath with transparent fictions. They should all be brought up on charges."

"You are out of order, Minister Agart!" McMahon said, slamming his gavel. "Unless you have proof, you will not pursue this line of thought further!"

Minister Agart fumed for a moment. "The Emilia camp is disqualified and I would further move that the Subaru camp be disbanded for treasonously supporting this fabrication."

"That is not the question before this body, Minister Agart! You have cast your vote. Now be silent!" McMahon ordered.

McMahon sighed. "Since the vote is split two to two, I will cast the deciding vote," He paused for a long moment.

"Taking into consideration all the evidence I feel I have no choice but to rule that the Emilia camp was indeed-"

"Excellency!" A young functionary in an elaborate hooded robe ran up to the bench carrying an envelope.

McMahon looked down at her coldly. "We are in session, Adjunct. I trust you justify your intrusion with news of profound value."

"Yes, Excellency! I believe it has direct bearing on the matter under consideration! That is why I dared to interrupt!" The functionary handed McMahon the letter and then bowed her way out of the room.

McMahon read the letter and his eyebrows rose. "Interesting," He said.

"What does it say?" Byrd asked.

"It appears that the village of Arlem in Master Roswaal's domain came under attack this afternoon by forces from the Kingdom of Gusteko," McMahon read. "They crossed the border with forty men and a large trained Troll and attempted to slaughter the villagers."

The court room murmured in concern.

"Dire news to be sure but how is this relevant to the matter at hand?" Agart asked.

"According to the Chieftain of this village, Subaru Natsuki took on these forces singlehandedly," McMahon continued.

Reinhard gasped in horror, picturing his friend's body lying bloodied and broken on the ground.

"Dead?" Choi asked.

"No. Apparently, Subaru Natsuki managed to defeat all of these forces by himself, including the troll."

Gasps ran through the room.

Felt's jaw was on the floor. She turned to look at Reinhard and saw his eyes shining in wonder.

"The chieftain further informs us that Subaru Natsuki managed to capture a Gusteko captain who is being transported to us for questioning," McMahon read.

Reinhard could tell that the sages were impressed. Capturing enemies of any decent rank alive was always difficult but the strategic information they could supply to the kingdom was invaluable.

"The chieftain concludes by saying that his village is eternally in the debt of Subaru Natsuki and Lady Emilia. He is proud to declare that their village has unanimously voted to pledge their complete support in the upcoming selection to the the rightful rulers of this land: Subaru and Emilia Natsuki."

The entire room erupted in confused chatter.

Reinhard felt that if his smile widened any further his head would break. *This* was it. This was the sign he'd been looking for. A man possessed of incredibly power and yet true kindness and greatness of spirit. The world *had* chosen Subaru, it had chosen him to be the guardian of this dark power; a power that he could turn to good causes. The world had recognized Subaru's great potential and elevated him accordingly. The 'rightful ruler' of this land indeed.

Reinhard began to see visions of a renaissance, a golden age ushered in by a king truly ordained by fate.

"Order!" McMahon cried, gaveling for silence.

The room eventually settled down.

"Why did we even need to read that?" Byrd asked. "It is completely irrelevant to the matter at hand."

"Defeating a foreign incursion and capturing a high ranking prisoner?" Choi asked with a raised eyebrow. "That seems worthy of *some* consideration."

"Even if those actions were true, which I doubt-" Agart interrupted.

"Do you truly believe that a village chief *and* the commander of the local garrison who sent this message would have misrepresented themselves and declared there was a prisoner when in fact there was not?" Dore asked skeptically.

"My *point*," Agart growled. "Is that even if all this were true, I fail to see how it impacts the Emilia camp. In this letter I have heard about this Subaru Natsuki's supposed heroism but the only thing I have heard about Emilia is that she happened to be engaged to him when he accomplished it."

"For my part, I am not suggesting the report is false or even exaggerated," Byrd murmured. "However, such a claim is very hard to believe. I do not think that even the Sword Demon in his prime could face such odds with confidence."

"Sir Reinhard," Choi called.

Reinhard got to his feet and bowed. "Your Excellency."

"Are you familiar with your lord Subaru Natsuki's abilities?" Choi asked.

"I have no first hand knowledge of any special abilities-"

"You are being evasive!" Agart interrupted.

Reinhard's face darkened. "Lord Subaru Natsuki has no Divine Blessings. However, I am aware that he possesses an enormous reservoir of power of a type and nature unfamiliar to me. I have no clear understanding of its applications or limitations."

"Lord Roswaal, could this strange power be related to Subaru Natsuki's claims to being from beyond the Great Waterfall?" McMahon asked.

"Possibly, your Excellency. I have nooooo knowledge to draw upon in analyzing this matter," Roswaal replied.

"Sir Reinhard, where do you place this Subaru Natsuki's power relative to your own abilities?" Dore asked.

"I am uncertain, your Excellency. I have never encountered a person whose abilities I was unable to probe before," Reinhard replied.

"One of these candidates wears the face of the Witch," Agart spat. "The other is clearly a monster from beyond this world. They should both be-"

"Enough, all of you," McMahon graveled for silence. "You have cast your votes. Mine shall decide."

Reinhard held his breath. If Emilia was pushed out of the selection, might not Subaru abandon it as well and seek other means to cure her people? If Subaru simply went into seclusion with Emilia, the potential loss to Lagunica and the world at large would be incalculable!

McMahon hesitated, drumming his fingers on the bench for several moments. "Taking into consideration all of the factors and testimony presented, I do not find clear and convincing evidence that the Emilia camp was in violation. Therefore by three to two it is so ordered that the Emilia camp shall remain in the selection at this time," McMahon said.

The audience burst out in a babble of excited conversation and there was even scattered applause from the back.

Felt put her fingers to her lips and blew a whistle which Reinhard hastily silenced.

McMahon gaveled for silence but then he turned around and walked away, perhaps sensing that he would need to send in the guard if he truly wished to restore order.

Roswaal departed the castle without a word, smiling in self satisfaction.

Reinhard noticed his father glowering near the entrance. He then turned and stalked away.

Felt followed his gaze as Heikel left. "So," She drawled. "You headed home tonight?"

"If it would not be an imposition, Miss Felt, I would humbly ask again for your gracious hospitality," Reinhard said with a smile and a low bow.

Felt grinned at him. "Sure, it gets lonely over there when Gramps is passed out drunk."

After dark, Emilia, Subaru, Ram, and Rem finally returned to the manor and all were weary but none more so than Subaru.

I feel like this forced smile is going to fall off my face any second and the rest of my face might go with it. I have a piercing headache and my body is begging to lie down. Why the hell did that take so long? Did we really need to organize a vote on the spot? I'm grateful for the support, of course, but did I really need to supervise the vote? And then they ask me to give a speech! I didn't know I was going to need to give a speech! Do nobles in this world just walk around with spare speeches in their pockets on the off chance they're asked for one? Jeez, I don't even know what the hell I said to the villagers!

Remember when you really wanted to be a hero and a lord among men? Remember when you thought it would be easy? Kind of ironic, huh? A lot can change in four days. Subaru thought to himself.

After they entered the manor, Ram abruptly turned to face him. "Lord Subaru," She said with a slight bow. Subaru's eyes widened at this honorific coming from Ram. "You have my deepest gratitude for protecting the name and reputation of Lord Roswaal M. Mathers. I will concede that you are not completely useless."

"Coming from you, that's high praise, Ram," Subaru said with a tired smile.

"One other matter: Now that your engagement is official, do you and Miss Emilia wish to move into the same bedroom?" Ram asked.

Subaru and Emilia both turned bright red. "Ah... I think... maybe we need to work up to that one, Ram," Subaru said weakly.

"Of course," Ram said, turning away with a sly smile on her face.

Damn you, Ram! You are mean! Subaru thought.

"Dinner, of course, is not prepared," Rem said, looking intently at Emilia and ignoring Subaru, "But if anyone is hungry my sister and I will provide it."

"Nothing for me, thanks," Subaru sighed. "I just want to get up to my room and collapse!"

Subaru took a step and his leg gave way underneath him. He would have fallen to the floor if not for Emilia catching him.

"Or maybe I'll save time and just collapse now," Subaru mused as Emilia helped him up.

"No dinner for me either, thank you," Emilia replied. "I ate at the village," She looked at Subaru. "Subaru, let me help you get to bed."

"Oh, that's OK, Mili. You don't have to do-whoa!" Subaru gasped as Emilia effortlessly picked him up and carried him up the stairs.

Subaru was a little weirded out by the situation of being carried to his room but being this close to Emilia, and even being cradled by her, certainly felt nice.

Emilia brought Subaru up to the room which he had shared with Reinhard and gently placed him on the bed. She leaned over him and gently stroked his head. "Subaru, do you, um" She blushed and looked away. "Do you need any help getting undressed tonight?"

Man that sounds awesome! Too bad I'm too tired to enjoy it, Subaru thought.

"Nah, thanks, Emilia. I think I'll manage," He smiled at her.

"Goodnight, Subaru," Emilia smiled back. She moved as if to kiss his cheek then lost her nerve and pulled back but she was smiling as she went out the door.

Subaru took several deep breaths, letting his body sink bonelessly into the bed. He took one last deep breath, rolled over and placed his face in his pillow.

And then he cried.

Subaru wept, sobbed, and whimpered like an infant.

Oh my god, I was so freaking scared! I thought I was going to die! One wrong move and they would have torn me apart! It would have been my blood pooling in the village square! It would have been just like Elsa all over again!

Subaru kept sobbing and the tears kept coming. Deep, wrenching sobs that he felt would rip his body apart. Subaru let himself remember the horrible, twisted corpses he had created: murdering men he had no quarrel with aside from them following orders written by evil commanders.

Could he have saved them? Could he have spared them like he had Rem?

In his heart, he knew the answer was simply no, but the weight of all those lives ending, all that potential cut short, it still hurt. Subaru had never killed anyone before and he fervently hoped he would never have to do so again.

The bodies. There was something so horrible about those bodies. How they had broken open like rotten fruit, all their innards exposed. Seeing someone naked without their permission was thought to be a violation but seeing their corpses ripped open felt like a far deeper one. It meant that their personhood had been stripped away, no longer living beings but simply raw meat and rotting juices pooling on the ground.

Did I look like that lying on the floor after Elsa ripped into me? No, no, don't think about it.

Subaru cried for almost twenty minutes and then he felt himself beginning to calm down. He didn't rush it. He had earned this catharsis. He just lay there sobbing letting the fear slowly work its way out of him like the ache out of a sore muscle.

Finally, Subaru settled down and quickly striped down to his shorts.

He was about to go to bed when he heard a knock on the door. "Come in," He called, before he wondered if it could be Rem coming to settle the score.

Emilia poked her head in, wearing her purple nightgown.

"Hi, Emilia," Subaru said, his mouth going dry.

"Subaru," Emilia twisted her hands together in her gown nervously. "Um, since Sir Reinhard is in the capitol, could I sleep in his bed tonight? I thought it might give us a chance to talk," She blushed furiously.

Subaru smiled. "I'd like that."

Emilia smiled back at him then came over to sit next to Subaru.

Subaru absently took Emilia's hand in his own and they just sat together for a moment, both looking at their knees, their shoulders almost touching.

"Subaru, you were very brave today," Emilia whispered.

Subaru chuckled. "Brave or stupid? Man, I still can't believe I survived that."

Emilia shook her head. "You're much too modest. You were a hero! You saved those people's lives. They all really admire you and... so do I," Emilia glanced away.

Subaru turned bright red.

Emilia... admires me? Is she serious?

Subaru was about to make another joke to break the tension and then he thought better of it. If Emilia might really be his wife someday then...

Subaru sighed rubbing his face. "Emilia, I was so scared," Subaru admitted in a ragged breath. "I was sure that I was going to die," He buried his face in his hands.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, wrapping her arms around him and drawing his head to her shoulder.

Subaru cried again. Not the same wracking sobs as before but a calmer cleaner kind of weeping.

Emilia stroked his head. "It's alright, Subaru. It's alright. Just let it all out. It's over now."

He wept for a few minutes and let the warmth of Emilia's body calm him before sitting up again.

"Subaru, why were you so scared?" Emilia asked softly. "I saw the whole thing. They could never even scratch you. Your magic seems to make you invincible!"

Subaru stared at Emilia in astonishment. Then he began to smile. Then, unable to help himself, he started to laugh. He laughed until he fell over on the bed curling up in a ball and clutching his stomach while Emilia just stared at him in shock.

Finally he calmed down and grabbed a very confused Emilia's hand bringing it to his lips and kissing it gently.

"Subaru," Emilia asked awkwardly. "What was so funny?"

"You said my magic makes me invulnerable," Subaru whispered with a smile.

"Well...yes, it certainly seemed to," Emilia nodded.

"For five seconds," Subaru clarified.

Emilia blinked. "What?"

"My magic makes me invulnerable for five seconds. Then I can't use it for thirty," Subaru giggled.

Why the hell do I think this is funny?!

Emilia's mouth moved but no words came out.

"That whole thing was one massive bluff!" Subaru said, sitting up. "Scare them and then hope I can keep them talking until the cooldown timer ends!"

"Subaru!" Emilia gasped. "Do you realize how easily you could have died out there?!"

"What?! Are you kidding me?!" Subaru demanded, grabbing both of her hands. "Fuck, yes! This was freaking insane! That was sheer luck out there!" Subaru said, pointing out the window toward the village. He covered his eyes with his hand. "I was not in control of that situation at *all*."

Emilia buried her face in her hands and shook her head. "Oh Gods, I am marrying a crazy person!"

"Yeah, pretty much!" Subaru said, somewhere between laughing and crying. He reached out to pull one of Emilia's hands away from her face. "I *am* glad I didn't die though."

Emilia raised an eyebrow. "Do you have any other obvious statements you want to make?"

"I'm just saying. I realized when I was standing down there that I couldn't afford to die. There was something very important I hadn't done yet," Subaru smiled.

"What's that?"

"I haven't kissed you yet."

Emilia turned scarlet. "Oh," She replied. Her eyes darted around the room almost as if looking for an escape.

"It's OK," He told her gently. "I'm in no rush. It's just a moment I'm really looking forward to. When you're ready, I'll still be here."

Emilia smiled a little embarrassed. Subaru turned away for a moment to rub his eyes. "Are you ready for bed?" He asked.

"Mm-hmm," Emilia agreed and while Subaru had his eyes closed, Emilia darted in to kiss him on the cheek.

Subaru looked at Emilia with a broad smile.

Emilia was blushing furiously but she still looked rather pleased with herself. "Goodnight Subaru," Emilia said, getting into the other bed.

Subaru slipped under his own covers and smiled at Emilia as she laid there smiling back at him.

Emilia's eyes fluttered closed and she began to quietly snore. Her face was fixed in a soft smile.

Subaru sighed. This was not going to work. He didn't want to close his eyes, even to sleep, if she was there.

Subaru nestled deeper under the covers and looked across the room at the sleeping princess he might marry someday.

And then he was asleep.

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 4**

Subaru woke up early the next morning. Last night's carnage still bothered him but looking across the room to see Emilia sleeping there with a smile on her face was a wonderful way to wake up.

Subaru became aware of something small and furry that was floating just over his head.

"Did anything happen last night that I should be made aware of?" Puck asked with an edge in his voice.

"Well, I did kill a troll last night," Subaru said with a yawn.

Puck blinked, looking confused.

"Puck?" Emilia asked in a sleepy voice, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Lia, are you alright?" Puck darted over to her.

Emilia looked confused. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Puck spun around in midair to glower at Subaru.

Subaru sighed. *The sun just came up. It is too freaking early in the morning to be dealing with a jealous, possessive cat who can both read my mind and end me whenever he wants.* "Oh for God's sake, Puck! Nothing happened! We're even sleeping in two different beds! What could you even be thinking that we did?!"

"I'm not sure what you're worried about, Puck," Emilia said slowly, "But I thought that sleeping here would give Subaru and me more time to talk. It didn't seem to be a big deal."

Puck sighed. He looked at Subaru with annoyance. "Just remember, Subaru: you and Lia are probationary. I still have my doubts about you."

Subaru shook his head. "And what are the odds of a mortal creature living long enough to resolve said doubts?"

Puck didn't answer and simply herded a confused Emilia out the door. "Come on, Lia. We need to get you dressed."

"Bye, Subaru!" Emilia shouted as the tiny flying spirit literally pushed her out the door.

"Bye, Mili!" He yelled back as she disappeared around the corner.

Subaru shook his head and laughed.

After breakfast, Subaru and Emilia had just sat down on the couch to talk when a very annoyed-looking Beatrice entered the room carrying Puck.

Subaru raised an eyebrow as Beatrice tried to climb into a chair on the other side of the room.

"No, not here, Betty. Over there," Subaru heard Puck whisper.

Beatrice turned around to look at Subaru and Emilia. Beatrice looked absolutely humiliated but she came over to the couch where the two sat and, with some effort, managed to wedge herself and Puck into the small space between Subaru and Emilia.

"Really, Puck?" Subaru asked.

Puck smirked at him.

"What's going on?" Emilia asked.

Subaru snickered, getting an idea. "Oh, don't you see, Mili?" Subaru asked in a sad voice.

She shook her head, frowning.

"Beatrice is lonely. That's why she's sitting here with us," Subaru explained, hiding a smile with difficulty.

Beatrice visibly jumped while Puck looked confused. "Betty is *not* lonely!" She protested. "Betty is just doing what her Bubby-"

"It's OK, Beako," Subaru soothed. "We all love you. Oh, you poor dear, you need a hug. Mili, help me hug her," Subaru instructed.

Beatrice's jaw dropped.

Emilia nodded seriously and they both wrapped their arms around the spirit loli.

"No!" Beatrice shrieked. "Betty does not need hugs! Betty just needs her Bubby, I suppose!" Beatrice leaped off the couch, clutching Puck, and raced out of the room at top speed.

Subaru got one glimpse of Puck staring back at him in frustration as the two disappeared out of the room.

Subaru burst out laughing.

Emilia looked at Subaru with suspicion. "Subaru, what just happened?"

"Oh, I was just having some fun with Puck," Subaru snickered.

"Don't you be mean to Puck!" Emilia said, putting her hand on her hips. "And why has Puck been acting so weird lately?"

"Weird?"

"Yes! He kept asking me questions about what we did last night and when I asked him what he meant he got all flustered and didn't answer me! And why is he telling me not to be around you so much? Every time I ask, he admits he likes you so why doesn't he want me to spend time with you? He won't tell me!"

Subaru frowned. *Maybe Emilia really doesn't know how Puck feels about this. If she's really been alone for a long time, except for Puck, then she probably doesn't have much experience with human relationships. I know the overprotective father trope from a thousand different sitcoms but Emilia is probably encountering it for the first time.*

"You know, Mili," Subaru began awkwardly. "Fathers tend to have trouble when their daughters first become... romantically involved with people. They can get jealous and possessive because they feel like someone is taking their little girl away. They worry that they won't get the same kind of attention as before. It's certainly an unattractive trait but it's very common."

Emilia gasped. "Are you saying Puck is afraid I'm going to leave him?" She asked in a stricken voice.

"No! No, I don't think he thinks that," Subaru disagreed. "It's just... I think Puck is little afraid of change right now."

"I don't understand."

"How long have you and Puck been together?" Subaru asked.

"About seven years I think, ever since he thawed me out of the ice," Emilia answered.

Subaru stared at her. "...OK. I am definitely going have some more questions about that. But for right, now let's stay on topic," Subaru continued. "It's been just the two of you for almost seven years. That worked for Puck. He had you all to himself. But now there's the possibility of someone else in the mix and that your attention could be divided. You might not have as much time for him. You might even decide you love someone else as much as you love Puck. Those ideas make Puck a little... scared."

Wait, am I describing a father who's afraid of letting go of his little girl or am I describing a little kid who doesn't want someone taking his Mommy away? Or maybe I'm describing a father who acts just like a little kid?

"I didn't mean to hurt Puck," Emilia said, sounding very guilty.

"You're not the one hurting him-"

"Lord Subaru and Lady Emilia," Ram said primly as she entered the room. "Miss Petra is here to speak with you."

Subaru shut up and took Emilia's hand.

Emilia quickly composed herself and said, "Please, ask her to come in."

Petra walked into the room looking quite overwhelmed by the manor. As soon as she saw Subaru she turned bright red.

"Hello, Petra, how are you today?" Subaru asked.

Petra didn't answer.

Oh boy. I recognize these signs. Somebody has a crush, presumably on me but Emilia isn't out of the realm of possibility. Why is it that even back home all the girls who fall in love with me are like half my age? Can't I attract someone around my own age? What does it say about me that the only people who think I'm cool and mature are around

ten years old? I mean I guess this trait of attracting girls half my age might be nice if continues into my forties but right now it's really inconvenient.

Subaru suddenly had an idea.

"Emilia, could I ask you to entertain Petra for a bit? I have a chore I should take care of. I'll be back in a few minutes," Subaru said, getting off the couch.

"Of course," Emilia said, bidding Petra to come closer.

Petra seemed much more comfortable entering the room now that Subaru was leaving it. *OK, maybe it's not a crush. Maybe she's just scared of me after she watched me tear apart a company of soldiers and a giant cyclops last night. I'd certainly understand it but that would still suck.*

After leaving Emilia and Petra alone, Subaru searched the manor for Beatrice's library. He found it on the third floor.

"Gah!" Beatrice screamed as soon as he opened the door. Beatrice flopped off her futon, hiding behind it like a shield. She raised one hand threateningly while she cradled Puck in the other. "Don't come any closer, in fact! Betty is not for hugging!" She said as if threatening a battle to death.

"Relax, Beako. I'm not here to bother you. I actually wanted to talk to Puck," Subaru replied.

"About what?" Puck grumbled.

"About Emilia. Isn't that something that we could talk about?" Subaru asked.

Puck pulled himself out of Beatrice's arms and floated over to Subaru with his arms folded across his chest. "Talk."

Subaru sighed. "OK, Puck. I know you're not exactly crazy about my proposing to Mili. So I thought we might at least try to find common ground."

"Common ground?" Puck lashed his tail. "What common ground could we possibly have?"

"Well, we both want Emilia to be happy, right? So that's something we have in common," Subaru replied.

Puck's eyes narrowed but he didn't reply.

Subaru sighed. "Look, I know this is all happening really fast. Emilia and I need to remain engaged at least until after the selection is over. By then it's extremely likely that Emilia will have decided I'm not the man for her and she'll break the engagement off."

"Oh no, that would be just awful," Puck said in a thoroughly unconvincing voice.

Subaru briefly wondered if Puck could survive being hit by *Indomitable*. "But," Subaru grated. "That gives us two years where we need to find a way to live with each other."

"Why would I bother to do that?" Puck sniffed.

"Because you're hurting Emilia," Subaru said flatly.

Puck went absolutely still.

"You really didn't notice?" Subaru asked. "It bothers the hell out of Emilia every time we fight. It makes her miserable. So every time you and I go at it, we are hurting Emilia."

I could easily point out that you have been the one picking all of the fights, Puck, but I'm trying to make peace right now.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Subaru. I'd do anything for Lia," Puck said his eyes dangerously intent. "I'm on her side. Always."

"Me too," Subaru stated. "So, assuming we both really mean those words and it's not just hot air, we need to find a way to deal with each other."

Puck's eyes narrowed. "I'm not just going to let you take my daughter away, Subaru!"

Subaru sighed. "I'm not going to take her away. If I thought that would work, I'd have already done it. Don't you think I'd like to have her undivided attention as much as you would?"

Puck started and his eyes opened wide.

Yup. I thought that was how he felt.

"I'm not trying to get Emilia away from you because it would make her sad. It's just that simple," Subaru said. "If having you in her life would make Emilia a tiny bit happier, if you being there would make her smile just a little bit more often, why *wouldn't* I beg you to stay with her and do exactly that? My goal is to make Emilia as happy as possible. If that means sharing her with you then that's just what I have to do."

Puck floated silently for a moment.

"We have a common goal, Puck. We should work together to carry it out," Subaru urged.

Puck glanced away.

"Lia is... happier when you're around," Puck admitted after a moment. "You're the first real friend she's ever had. The first one who didn't treat her differently because of how she looks," Puck paused. "If I killed you or drove you away, Lia would be unhappy."

Do you have to talk about my death as if you were swatting a fly, Puck?

"So I guess the only solution is for us to live with each other and work together to keep Mili happy," Subaru said. "Hey, who knows? We do this long enough, you and I might even learn to like each other!"

Puck actually cracked a smile. "That's pretty optimistic of you, Subaru. You'd have to make Lia *really* happy before I decided I liked you," His face became serious. "Subaru. Do not make me regret this. I'm trusting you with the most precious thing in the entire world."

"I think we can agree on that, Puck," Subaru replied with a slight smile.

They were both quiet for a moment.

"Puck, why don't you go pop in on Mili for a bit? I think she's worried that she made you angry. Seeing you would do her good," Subaru suggested.

Pucked stiffened. "Oh crap! Lia, thinks I'm mad at her?!" He vanished.

"Now that you have taken Betty's Bubby away, you can leave here, I suppose," Beatrice sniffed.

Subaru noticed Beatrice was now standing next to him with her arms folded across her chest.

I guess Beako decided I wasn't going to immediately try to hug her again, Subaru thought.

"You have a lot of books in here, Beako," Subaru said, ignoring her instructions. "Why don't you keep them in the other library?"

"This is Betty's library, I suppose. It was given to Betty by mother to protect," Beatrice replied.

"And your mother is also Puck's mother? Where is she at?" Subaru asked.

"Ugh. Stop asking stupid questions, I suppose!" Beatrice growled, sitting down on her stool and opening a large book while pointedly ignoring Subaru.

Subaru walked over to a bookshelf and plucked down a book at random. "Hmm. Interesting," Subaru opened it and was confronted with a myriad collection of incomprehensible symbols. "Oh right. I forgot I can't read this language," Subaru sighed. "That really needs to be my number one task right now. Nobody wants an illiterate on the throne," Subaru mused to himself while putting the book back in place.

"Subaru!" Emilia called from behind him.

Subaru turned around to see Emilia, Puck, Petra, and the twins standing in the doorway.

"Subaru, the village of Arlem is holding a feast today to celebrate you rescuing them and we've all been invited!" Emilia said smiling.

"Neat!" Subaru said, noticing that Petra was again bright red and staring at her shoes.

"Come on, Subaru," Puck said, floating up to him. "If you're going to play the hero you have to let people thank you once in a while. Otherwise they'll feel guilty."

"Good advice, Puck," Subaru said with a smile.

"I'll go prepare the carriage," Rem said, walking away.

"We should get moving or we'll be late," Ram agreed, following her sister.

Subaru started to leave the library and then paused. He glanced back at Beatrice who was buried in her book, although considering that her eyes weren't moving, it was hard to believe she was actually reading it.

"Hey, Beako, want to come to the party with us?" Subaru asked gently.

Beatrice looked up from her book only to sneer at him. "And why would Betty want to come with you, I suppose?"

Subaru actually smiled at this.

OK I don't need Reason and Judgment for this. Beatrice acts angry but she's clutching that book like a shield. Beatrice is scared of something. I bet she really wants to get out of here and her acting like this is just a defense mechanism.

"Well," Subaru said thoughtfully. "For one thing, Puck will be there."

Beatrice gave Subaru a look that wished him a very slow death as she put down her book.

Rem drove the carriage while Ram sat next to Petra. Emilia and Subaru sat across from them, sandwiching Beatrice who held Puck.

"You know, Subaru, the little girl was saying some very nice things about you," Puck informed him.

Petra turned bright red and tried to hide behind Ram.

Unfortunately for Petra, Ram wasn't having any of it. "Sit still!" Ram snapped and Petra froze in place.

"Apparently you became some kind of big hero while I was sleeping," Puck continued.

"Sorry, buddy," Subaru replied. "Next time I almost die, I'll wake you up so you can watch," Subaru snickered.

Well OK, Puck's been taunting me the whole trip but at least he's being good humored about it. And he's been talking to me on this trip instead of just ignoring me. I know that 'buddy' is a major stretch but actually I think this is a very good sign.

As they pulled into Arlem, Subaru hopped out the carriage door. The entire square was decorated and enormous tables were piled high with food. There was quite a crowd who all seemed very excited to see the carriage. Subaru reached up to help the ladies down.

I remember seeing stuff like this in movies. A gentleman assists the lady out of the carriage, right? It seems like the right thing to do in this situation, Subaru mused.

Subaru extended his hand to Petra as she exited the carriage. Petra flushed but she took his hand and he helped her hop down. Then Petra darted off into the crowd, most likely looking for her Mom.

Ram came out next. Subaru offered her his hand but Ram looked at it as though it hadn't been washed in a week then leapt down on her own and walked away without looking at Subaru.

Beatrice came out next, holding Puck. Subaru offered her his hand.

"And what is this about, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"I'm trying to be a gentleman, I guess?" Subaru replied, wondering if he had screwed this whole thing up. "I was going to help you down."

"Hm. What makes you think Betty needs help, I suppose?" She asked with a sniff.

"I didn't think you needed help. I thought you might *want* help," Subaru replied. He suddenly thought of something. "After all, life can be incredibly lonely if there's no one around to help you," He added.

Beatrice started and then fumed but she ultimately let Subaru take her hand. She gently bounced down onto the ground. She walked away with Puck without looking back.

Emilia was last and she smiled down at Subaru when he offered her his hand. She took it and then landed gracefully. The two of them just smiled at each other for a moment. Without even thinking about it, Subaru reached out and brushed back a stray lock of hair on her cheek.

Emilia flushed but she didn't stop smiling.

Subaru coughed glancing away. "Rem! Do you need any help with the carriage?"

"No, Lord Subaru," Rem said, jumping down from the high seat with no apparent concern and making to follow her sister. "Everything is attended to."

"*Lord* Subaru?" He whispered to Emilia. "When did she start calling me that?"

"Maybe she's starting to see who you are beneath appearances. A smart man once told me that your appearance doesn't say anything about who you are as a person," Emilia told him with a smile.

"I know for a fact it was not a smart man who told you that," Subaru quipped as the two joined the party.

The feast was ebullient and festive. Subaru and Emilia were the absolute centers of attention. Emilia was nervous around so many people but she began to relax as she realized that they didn't feel threatened by her appearance. Subaru, on the other hand, was seriously distracted. He was struggling to keep the smile on his face and engage in the vapid pleasantries typical of both nobles and politicians.

Before the feast started, the Village Chief had brought them on a tour of the village: A very very short tour since you could view almost the entire village just by standing in the square. However, Subaru had learned two things which he thought would be of immense value. And a third that made him extremely worried.

The first was when he noticed an unplowed field. "Excuse me, Chief," Subaru said. "If you're worried about having enough food for the winter like you said, why aren't you planting over there?"

The Chief glanced at where he was pointing. "Oh, we leave those fields fallow this year. It's good for the soil." The chief answered.

Fallow... I remember that word from school... what did they tell us?

Wait a second! You don't need to leave fields fallow. It was...

Shit where did I hear this... It was at school...

Oh, I remember now! It was that asshole history teacher! Crop Rotations! He insisted on us learning crop rotations for like three months. It was the most boring history class I ever slept through. I think Mom said that the teacher had written a book on 'History of Farming Techniques' or something and decided to just teach us that instead of actual world history. I remember the Principal had to get involved before we even opened our text books.

God, I can't believe I actually remember this shit. Then again he spent three months drilling it into our heads. We used to call it a legal form of torture. Or is it that Reason and Judgment is jogging my memory?

"Hey, Chief," Subaru asked. "What kind of crops do you usually grow out here?"

"Oh, corn, wheat, and barley usually," The chief answered. "We don't make much money on anything else."

Those are all 'greedy' crops. If he's growing those one after the other no wonder the soil around here stinks. Jeez, I can't believe I remember all this crap. Oh God. Please don't tell me I owe that asshole teacher a debt. I just couldn't handle it.

"Doesn't look like you've got too many animals out here," Subaru commented.

"Unfortunately, no. It's very hard to keep them fed through the winter," The chief explained. He then continued the tour pointing out everyday objects as though they were important.

Emilia gave Subaru a quizzical look but Subaru mouthed: 'Later' and she nodded.

Well, it makes sense that they don't have many animals if those are the only crops they grow. They're not growing anything to feed the animals through the winter. I remember that asshole told us that the four crop rotation system was what allowed farmers to stop letting fields go fallow so often.

Come to think of it I think that was also what let them keep more animals right? The cycle was... come on Subaru, this was a question on every weekly review test for two months straight!

It was corn... or wheat, then turnips, then barley... then clover? Yeah, I think that's right. Corn is really greedy for nutrients so you grow that first. Turnips don't need the same nutrients as corn and wheat so you can grow them after the greedy crop with no problem, and I think they even might put some nutrients back in the soil.

Yeah I remember now! Two human crops and two animal crops. Wheat and barley for people and the turnips and clover feed the animals. Those fields of animal feed let you raise and keep more animals. Clover is supposed to be super good for the soil. Then after you feed the animals a diet of clover, their manure is supposed to be rich in nutrients for the soil.

Could starting an agricultural revolution help Emilia and I take the throne? Maybe. Of course, the question is: how do we even start one and how do we make sure we get credit for it?

Subaru's second revelation came when they briefly visited Petra's house, whose mother worked as a seamstress. The house was a small one-room cottage that the family shared. Petra's mother had a small workplace near her bed where she appeared to sew clothing by hand.

Mom liked to sew when she was younger. It was just a hobby but I remember that sewing machine she used. I remember one year it had broken and before we tossed it away and got a new one, she and Dad had cracked it open so I could look inside. So they could show me all the gears. Yeah, I remember I was super into legos and gears at that age so the sewing machine innards were pretty cool. I... I think I remember how it worked. I think I remember how all those gears fit together. Could I make one? If got someone to make gears, could I make a sewing machine? I think I could. And if I did what would that be worth?

It wasn't until Subaru was sitting beside Emilia at the feast and trying to keep a smile on his face that the third revelation occurred to him.

OK, Subaru. We need to have a very serious chat. You do realize that all of this is bullshit, right? Subaru mused to himself.

Oh yeah, you totally remember how complex crop rotations work. You read about them in a class you slept through five years ago; it makes perfect sense.

And, of course, you remember how that old sewing machine worked. You looked at it for a full ten minutes when you were eight years old. It's only natural that it was imprinted on your brain.

Wake up, Subaru. You are not this smart, you are not this creative, and every teacher you've ever had in your life would agree. How do you remember any of this stuff?

Subaru rubbed his face as he tried to put all this together.

It's got to be Reason and Judgment. It really is making you smarter. That's the only logical explanation. OK so... why is that a bad thing? That's a good thing, right?

Well, maybe, maybe not. Indomitable makes me feel like my heart is going to pop like a soap bubble whenever I over rely on it. So... what is Reason and Judgment doing to me? So far it seems free to use but what if there's a big price tag attached and I just don't know what it is? Could it be affecting my mind? If it changed my behavior and personality, would I even be aware that it was happening? There's nobody here who could warn me if my personality was changing. None of them know me well enough yet to recognize the signs.

Come to think of it, even if that was happening, what could I do about it? I could stop using Reason and Judgment actively but if this theory is right, it might also having a passive effect on me just by possessing it. Even if I knew for certain that it was poisoning me, how could I ever completely shut it off?

Well, maybe that's the real answer. If there's nothing I can do about a problem I shouldn't bother worrying about it. I should try to be aware of it, just so I know what might be happening, but even if I do prove this theory, unless I think of some way to mitigate it, I might as well ignore it.

That being said... maybe I should reduce how often I trigger Reason and Judgment. Probably should save it for emergencies until I've had a chance to think this through. It'll be hard to stop using it but I can manage.

Just then, another carriage rolled into the village, a carriage that Subaru recognized.

Perfect. I so needed a distraction right now, Subaru smiled, getting up from the table and walking over to the carriage just as Reinhard van Astrea emerged from it.

"Red!" Subaru shouted, approaching the carriage.

"My lord," Reinhard bowed. "It is wonderful to see-oof." Reinhard choked as Subaru caught him in a hug.

"Great to see you, buddy!" Subaru smiled, stepping back.

Reinhard couldn't help but smile. "And you as well, my friend."

"Red?" A girl's voice asked. "I like that!" Felt said, jumping out of the carriage. "That is officially your new name, Reinhard!" She said with a laugh.

"Hey Felt, welcome to Arlem," Subaru said, walking over to her.

"A handshake is fine, I don't need a hug," Felt warned him.

"OK but this is special treatment, just this once," Subaru warned her before shaking her hand.

Felt chuckled. Emilia was coming over to the carriage as well.

"Good news, my friend. The sage council found in favor of Lady Emilia and she may continue to participate in the selection," Reinhard told him.

"Awesome. That is good news," Subaru said, trying to force some enthusiasm.

Huh. Weird. You'd think I'd be happier. I guess I'd just stopped worrying about Emilia being disqualified. I mean, don't get me wrong, two chances to win is way better than one but if Emilia had been disqualified I would have just promised her I would get the throne for her or otherwise deliver the blood. ...Maybe I was even secretly hoping she'd be disqualified. That way she'd be completely dependent on me.

God, Subaru. You really do suck. You should go submit yourself to Puck for disciplinary action.

Well... I don't honestly feel disappointed that Emilia is still in the selection. So at least I'm not a completely terrible person. I mean even if she became queen it's not like I would have walked away. Well, not unless she asked me to. Honestly, when we met I was sure it was just a matter of time before she told me I was bothering her and I should go somewhere else. But over the past few days something has changed. I'm actually starting to wonder if maybe she wants me to stay.

"Well, I'm certainly happy to see you, Felt, but what brings you way out here?" Subaru asked.

"Well, Red was making the trip and I wanted to ask you a few questions," Felt said with a smirk.

"Oh?" Subaru replied.

"The real reason is, I was afraid for Miss Felt's safety in the city during my absence," Reinhard interjected. "I am ashamed to admit this but I have discovered that my compatriots among the guard are not all as... righteous as I once thought. After Miss Felt gave testimony which the guard captain disapproved of, I was worried he might take advantage of my absence to do her harm, so I asked her to accompany me."

Subaru nodded. "Well, I'm glad to see you, Felt. Sorry it's not under better circumstances. It's actually good that you're here because I wanted to offer you a job."

"Really?" She asked in surprise.

"Yeah, but we'll get into the details later in private."

"Hello, Miss Felt," Emilia said, walking up to them.

Felt bit her lip and looked down at the ground. "Um. I just wanted to say that... I'm really sorry that I stole your insignia, Lady Emilia," Felt whispered to avoid anyone overhearing them. "I thought it was just jewelry. But Reinhard explained to me how important it was and how much trouble I caused you and Subaru by taking it and... I'm just really really sorry."

Emilia's eyes widened and she patted Felt's bowed head. "That's alright. I think everything really worked out for the best. If you hadn't taken it, I never would have met Subaru."

"Good point," Subaru approved.

Felt looked up at Emilia in wonder. "Wait, that's it? Damn. I spent the whole trip up here thinking you would want to rake me over the coals a few times."

"I did tell you," Reinhard commented quietly.

Felt put her arms behind her head and laughed. "So, Subaru, I heard the joyous news about you two! Where's my invitation? I thought we were friends, guy!"

Subaru laughed and even Emilia chuckled. "I promise, you'll know as soon as we pick a date. Currently looking like about two years out at least. But hey, you're here, join the celebration!"

"Yeah, well, before we do that, I do have a question for you, Subaru," Felt said.

"What's that?"

"There are all these rumors floating around town about you." Felt said.

"Whatever it is, I have an alibi. I was with Emilia," Subaru said seriously.

Felt laughed. "Good one. No, people are saying that you fought a troll alone. Actually they're saying that you not only fought the troll but killed it with your bare hands. Even the sages looked like they might believe it. Folks all over town are telling stories about 'Subaru the Invincible.' Is there any truth to that?"

"Of course not," Subaru laughed.

Felt smugly held out her hand and Reinhard dropped a gold coin in her palm with a sigh.

"The troll had a battle axe. I took its axe away and then used that to kill the troll," Subaru finished.

Felt's jaw dropped and a grinning Reinhard deftly plucked the coin out of her hand and returned it to his pocket.

Subaru squinted.

Is it just me or does Red look really pleased with himself?

"Uh Felt? I'm guessing that Red bet a gold coin that the rumor was true but you're not giving *him* any money so what did you bet?"

Felt sighed and covered her face. "Don't ask," She moaned.

The group returned to the manor shortly before sunset.

"Miss Ram, I spoke with Lord Roswaal before departing the city," Reinhard said. "He asked me to give you these missives," He handed her a stack of envelopes. "Please observe that the seal is unbroken," Reinhard finished, taking a long hard look at Felt.

Felt folded her arms across her chest, muttering to herself.

"Thank you, Sir Reinhard," Ram said with a perfunctory curtsy. "I will locate a room for Miss Felt. Sir Reinhard can return to his original room with Lord Subaru."

"Ram, you're mean," Subaru complained.

Ram looked at him strangely.

Subaru blushed. *Oh right. The only people who know where Emilia slept last night are Emilia, Puck and me!*

Ram noticed that Emilia had turned a similar shade of red. "Ah," Ram said smirking. "Well, whenever anyone wishes to change the sleeping arrangements, they can simply let me know. I'd hate to be mean."

Subaru nodded awkwardly.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Reinhard said in confusion.

"I'll tell you later," Subaru sighed.

Felt was trying conceal her laughter and failing badly.

"Oh, don't worry Subaru," Puck said with a yawn from Beatrice's arms. He sounded smug but not altogether unkind. "You'll see her in the morning. Frankly, I'm ready for bed too."

"Actually, I was hoping to see you right now, Emilia," Subaru said. "Feel like taking a stroll in the gardens before bed? I wanted to talk a few things over with you."

"Sounds pleasant," Emilia agreed.

Puck frowned. "Lia, maybe I should-"

Emilia stopped Puck with a calm, patient look.

The spirit cat sighed. "Lia, don't stay up too late."

"I won't," She promised.

Puck disappeared.

"Well, it was nice having you with us tonight, Beako," Subaru said to Beatrice.

Beatrice turned her face away and folded her arms. "Hm. Betty enjoyed having more time with her Bubby, I suppose."

"You're welcome," Subaru said with a smile.

Beatrice looked sourly at Subaru then walked away without a word.

"Red, why don't you and Felt head up. I'm sure you've both had a long couple of days," Subaru suggested.

Reinhard nodded.

"-So that's what I'm thinking," Subaru finished as he walked through the garden, hand in hand with Emilia. He'd told her about both of his ideas. The Crop Rotations he was sure they could implement. The sewing machine was more iffy. He'd said nothing about his new concerns with *Reason and Judgment*. For one thing he'd never told her about *Reason and Judgment*. He'd thought about telling her about it but something had always held him back.

Well, if I told her about Reason and Judgment I'd also have to tell her that I'm worried it could be adversely affecting me. I don't want her to be worried about it. For one thing, I'm not sure that it's happening and for another, even if I was sure, what could we do about it? It's probably better that I keep Reason and Judgment to myself for now, Subaru thought to himself.

Yeah, that's a great excuse... Hell, even I don't believe that one. I'm keeping it from Emilia for one reason: so she'll keep being impressed with how smart I am. She knows about Indomitable but telling her about Reason and Judgment feels... much more personal. The magic that affects the outside world is one thing but if Reason and Judgment is really what's behind all my deductions and clever decisions then... is any of it mine? Am I actually responsible for anything or am I just a husk wrapped around Reason and Judgment?

I like this new me. I feel smart. I feel capable. I... I really don't want to have to go back to the old me, and I definitely don't want to see the old me reflected in Emilia's eyes.

Emilia looked off in the distance thoughtfully. She had listened attentively to Subaru's plans. She vaguely understood Subaru's comments about Crop Rotations but Emilia had never seen a clock in her life. So his description of a 'sewing machine' and its 'gears' and 'levers' were completely foreign to her.

"Why didn't you talk to the Chief about the Crop Rotations?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged. "Well, I want to give him the idea but I also wanted to figure out how we could use the idea to help our camp. The campaign is going to start soon and we need some strategy to win. Kicking off an agricultural revolution might help us but I don't know how much or how we could take credit."

Emilia gave Subaru a stern look. "Subaru, you're talking about something that could ensure everyone in the kingdom has enough food to eat. We should be focusing on that and not the royal selection!"

"This isn't an 'either/or' thing, Mili," Subaru replied. "Yes, if it comes down to a choice between getting that dragon blood for you and saving people's lives then I definitely think you should choose the latter and I'm proud of you that you did. However, that's not the choice we're faced with. Right now the idea is: can we think of a way to advance *both* goals at the same time?"

They walked in silence for a moment. "What if we announced it at the selection?" Emilia suggested. "We declare that we're bringing agricultural innovations to Lagunica and we promise to eliminate hunger and revitalize the economy in our domain."

"Sounds like a good idea, Mili. I mean, it would be a good idea if we *had* a domain," Subaru chuckled. "Arlem is the only place that's currently backing us and even that is kind of questionable because of their primary allegiance to Roswaal."

"Who is also backing us!" Emilia pointed out. "If you told him about these ideas, you don't think Lord Roswaal would be interested? Why wouldn't he be? You're describing a huge improvement to his realm. The peasants would be happier, better fed, more productive, and trade in the realm would skyrocket! All of this would make Lord Roswaal wealthier and more powerful. Of course he'd be interested in trying it. You should also tell Sir Reinhard. He's one of the leaders of his

family. He might be able to convince people in his domain to try it as well."

Subaru gave Emilia a smirk. "Damn, Mili. When did you get so smart?"

Emilia glanced away with a smile. "What? You didn't believe that I was studying in the library every day? You thought I was just pretending?"

"Actually, I always assumed you were just playing with a magic flying cat," Subaru replied.

Emilia playfully shoved Subaru away with a laugh. When Subaru drew close to Emilia again, instead of taking her hand, he slipped his arm around her waist and they walked like that.

Emilia was smiling as she leaned into Subaru, resting her head against his shoulder.

"Puck had a lot to say about you today you know," Emilia whispered with her eyes closed.

"Whatever it was, I'm innocent," Subaru replied.

"Not that, you dummy!" Emilia said, playfully swatting at him. "He said he was glad that I had you there to help me whenever Puck wasn't around."

"Wow, praise from an overprotective father. I'm speechless," Subaru replied.

Emilia tried to push him again but this time she was so clumsy that Subaru actually wrapped both of his arms around her waist and pulled her in closer. Emilia was smiling up at him as she tentatively wrapped her arms around his neck.

Subaru's mouth went dry as he looked into those beautiful amethyst eyes. A man could drown in those eyes; a man could be pulled under.

"I'm glad Puck is feeling better about... us," He murmured awkwardly.

"Me too," Emilia whispered.

"Mili, how do you feel about us?" Subaru asked.

Emilia's face turned red but she didn't avert her gaze. "I'm not sure. I don't know much about these things. I just know... that I like the way I feel when I'm near you."

Subaru broke into a huge smile. "You can't keep saying things like that to me, Mili. You might make me burst from happiness."

"That's not fair, Subaru! Don't change the subject! You still haven't told me how you feel about me!" Emilia scolded.

Subaru wrapped his arms around her a little tighter. She was close enough that their breath mingled in the cool evening air. "I think, you are the most amazing person I've met in any world," Subaru said seriously.

"Subaru...", Emilia whispered.

Subaru moved his face less than an inch and their lips met. The world around Subaru vanished and there was nothing but *her*. The living breathing vibrancy of her. The softness of her hair, the faint sound of her breathing, and the warmth of her body cradled in his arms. It was a blissful, perfect moment that Subaru felt should last for an eternity.

And then they drew apart.

Emilia glanced away shyly but she was still smiling.

"You know, I've been waiting for that moment since the day we met," Subaru whispered.

"Subaru, it's only been six days!" Emilia laughed.

"Really? It's been that little? Because it kind of feels like I've already known you for a lifetime," Subaru said seriously. He wrapped his arm around her waist and she briefly nuzzled against his shoulder as they continued their stroll.

"Me too," She whispered.

Subaru was singing to himself when he got up to his room.

Reinhard was in the process of readying himself for bed.

"Hey, Red, how are you doing?" Subaru said, plopping down on his bed and pulling his shoes off.

"Quite well," Reinhard said with a small smile, climbing into bed. "You certainly seem to be in fine spirits tonight."

"Yes I am! I'm on top of the world, buddy!" Subaru laughed, standing up to undress. Then Subaru thought of something, "Hey, Red, are you tired?"

"Not particularly, is there something you need help with?"

"No, I was just hoping to get a few more details about what happened in the capitol," Subaru said, sitting down on the

bed.

Reinhard looked up at the ceiling and gathered his thoughts. "I arrived at the tavern and located Master Rom and Miss Felt. As you predicted, Miss Felt appeared to be in no danger of being caught by the guard any time soon. I explained the situation and Miss Felt agreed to help. I hid nearby while Felt was confronted by the guard and she gave them her statement," Reinhard hesitated. "I'm forced to admit that these knights did not live up to their titles."

"How so?"

"They threatened Miss Felt," Reinhard almost growled. "With physical violence and worse besides. These men are unworthy of any esteem much less any title of nobility!"

Subaru watched Reinhard closely for a moment. "I'm guessing you were close to these guards," Subaru said sadly.

Reinhard closed my eyes. "One of them was my father."

"I'm so sorry," Subaru murmured.

Reinhard took a deep breath and seemed to shake it off. "Not wanting to put Master Rom or Miss Felt in danger, I resolved to spend the night with them in case anyone came back to make mischief."

Subaru raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"The next morning, I went to the castle to give testimony and met Lord Roswaal already there. The two of us spent hours giving testimony; the same questions and the same answers over and over again. This continued until I begged leave to go and fetch Master Rom and Miss Felt."

"Good thinking," Subaru commented.

"Yes," Reinhard murmured. "I found a large group of the guard waiting on the only road that Miss Felt could take to the castle. They quickly gave way before me but I have often wondered what they might have done if I had not been there."

Subaru nodded.

"I brought Master Rom and Miss Felt to the castle and they also gave testimony. It seemed that Lady Emilia would be disqualified until the sage council heard word of your exploits in Arlem. Then the vote shifted and Lady Emilia was permitted to continue."

"That's what I was hoping for. That's why I asked the Chief to send the message," Subaru said smugly.

"I again asked Miss Felt for hospitality and spent the night with her and Master Rom. The next morning I asked Felt if she would be willing to come to the manor with me and she agreed. I spoke with Lord Roswaal before leaving and then we came out here."

"Did Roswaal say when he was coming back?" Subaru asked.

"Not to me," Reinhard shook his head. "Miss Ram might know. He likely would have informed her of his plans in the missives."

"Right, I'll ask her in the morning," Subaru said. "Red, you brought Felt out here because you thought she might be in danger in the city, right?"

Reinhard nodded.

Subaru buried his face in his hands for a long moment and sighed. Finally he looked up at Reinhard. "Reinhard, tell me the truth: how much danger have I put Felt in by involving her in this mess?"

Reinhard considered the question carefully. "To be honest she has risen to the attention of powerful men and she is an easy target for anyone that she has offended or displeased. I would say her danger is considerable."

"What about Rom?" Subaru asked. "I mean, I know he's the size of a mountain but he could be in danger as well."

Reinhard shook his head. "Master Rom is well known in the city and very much not an easy target. He has a reputation of persuading assailants to go elsewhere to play after inflicting them with major injuries. Beyond that, his testimony was swift and affected little. I believe him to be in no danger."

"That's good at least," Subaru sighed and shook his head. "This whole thing with Felt is my fault, Red. I put her in danger and if she goes back to the capitol she could be in danger again."

"We could arrange for her to make a fresh start in Karangi," Reinhard murmured.

Subaru shook his head. "Hell, no! She might be in exile right now but that's a temporary thing. We're not going to send her away from everyone and everything she ever cared about. I asked her to do this. I put her in this danger. She did this because she thought she owed me. So now, and for the rest of her life, she is *my* responsibility. People think she's an easy target? We're going to fix that. When we go back to the capitol she is coming with us. At the selection ceremony, I am going to put Felt front and center so everyone knows that Felt is a major player in the Subaru/Emilia faction. People think they can go after her with impunity? I will make sure entire city knows that if anyone hurts Felt we will rain fire on them!"

Reinhard smiled broadly. "Fair words, my friend, and just what I thought you'd say. That was why I brought her out here. I thought you would feel better knowing she was close at hand to protect."

"Very good thinking, Red," Subaru sighed and laid down. "My debts to you keep growing. I wonder if I'll even live long enough to pay them all back."

"Not to worry, my friend. I shall extend you credit. We all know that you're good for your debts," Reinhard smiled.

"Heh. I think you've been spending too much time with a certain pickpocket of my acquaintance."

Reinhard laughed.

Felt sat outside Subaru's room in a borrowed yellow nightgown. She'd come over to their room to ask Reinhard a question but had quickly forgotten it as she listened to their conversation. As their talk trailed off and they drifted to sleep, Felt wordlessly got up and walked back to her room.

The next morning Reinhard and Subaru got up and headed downstairs for breakfast. Along the way they encountered Emilia and Felt.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, looking tense.

"Morning, Mili," He frowned.

Why does Emilia look so nervous? Subaru thought.

"Subaru," Emilia twisted her fingers in her dress awkwardly. "We really need to talk."

Subaru hesitated a moment. "OK," He said slowly. "Red, why don't you and Felt go on without us. We'll be down in a bit."

Reinhard nodded and continued down to the dinning hall, pausing only to grab Felt when it became apparent that she intended to remain behind and watch.

"Is something wrong, Mili?" Subaru asked gently.

"No... well, yes. I mean, maybe," Emilia said helplessly.

Subaru walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her. Emilia stiffened for a moment and then relaxed with a sigh, burying her face in his chest. Subaru gently guided her to sit on a nearby window still. He sat beside her, rubbing her back.

"It's OK, Mili," He whispered. "Take your time and work your way up to it. Remember, you and I are a team and whatever the problem is, we will deal with it together."

Emilia looked up at him her eyes watery. "Subaru, do you... do you really mean that?"

"Of course, I do," Subaru said, rubbing her back. "Whatever the problem is, I know we can handle it. So just tell me what's bothering you."

"OK," Emilia took a deep breath. "Well it's about... last night."

"Last night?" Subaru swallowed hard. "Um. Do you think what we did last night was a bad idea?" He asked with a small catch in his voice.

"No! Well maybe. I mean, I liked it I'm just... I'm worried it was the wrong time," Emilia said, looking away.

The wrong time? For a kiss? I don't know how to interpret that!

Subaru sighed. "Emilia," He said gently. "What's really bothering you? I want to help but you have to tell me what's wrong."

Emilia took a deep breath and held it for a moment while looking Subaru straight in the eye. "It's about the baby in my tummy," She said.

Subaru stared at her.

"I'm sorry?" Subaru asked.

Emilia spoke in a rush, "I know that we're not married yet and I have no idea how to be a mother but I want to make sure that the baby has lots of love from the people who must love it. I know the royal selection will make things harder but that's not the baby's fault so I want to make sure that no matter what we have to do we give our baby a happy and stable life," She finished, gasping for breath.

I don't know what to say here. What's worse is I'm not sure I can refrain from laughing in Mili's face.

"OK, Mili," Subaru said, guiding her head back to his shoulder and rubbing her back. "I'm glad you told me about this. I always want to know about anything that's upsetting you," Subaru soothed.

Emilia relaxed against Subaru with a sigh as if announcing her pregnancy had taken every ounce of her courage.

"Emilia," Subaru said gently. "You do know that babies don't come from cabbages or storks or something, right?"

Emilia looked up at him. "Well, no. But when a boy and a girl kiss each other on the lips, that makes a baby right?"

Oh my God. Really? I can't handle this.

Subaru was so torn between amusement, relief, and sheer fury at a small, flying cat that he was afraid he was going to burst.

Subaru reached out to touch the gem around Emilia's neck. "Oooh, Puck!" He called.

The cat appeared in mid air with a yawn. "Listen, Subaru, just because we kind of bonded yesterday, it doesn't mean I'm going to start coming when you call."

"Puck, I'm starting to wonder if you might not have neglected a very important aspect of Emilia's education," Subaru said calmly.

"Like what?" Puck asked, his tail standing straight up and his arms folded defensively.

"Did you ever get around to telling her where babies come from?" Subaru asked.

Puck's tail fell at once. His face was aghast.

"So kissing doesn't make babies?" Emilia asked. "Not even on the lips?"

"Nope," Subaru answered.

"So where do babies come from?" She asked Puck.

Puck looked terrified. "You know, Subaru, I think I hear Betty calling me. But I have every confidence in your ability to handle this situation. Good luck!"

Puck disappeared.

Subaru stared at the empty space in astonishment. "Get back here, you stupid flying cat! You can't leave me to deal with this alone!" He yelled at empty air.

"Do you think Puck is mad at me?" Emilia asked.

"Nope," Subaru said, rubbing his forehead. "No, he's just a wimp and the next time you talk to him, please tell him that when I get my hands on him I'm going to smack his little paws."

"Subaru, are you... upset with me?" Emilia asked, looking at the floor.

Subaru took a deep breath and remembered himself. "Of course not, Mili," Subaru said, wrapping his arms around her. "I'm just a little annoyed with Puck. He should have explained these things to you years ago. The upshot is: You are *not* pregnant."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely positively sure," Subaru assured her.

"Then, Subaru, where *do* babies come from?"

It took Subaru and Emilia about half an hour to go over the basics. During this time, Subaru took frequent advantage of *Reason and Judgment* to pause time while he considered what to say.

I know I'm trying to limit my uses of Reason and Judgment except in emergencies, but if having to explain the facts of life to your girlfriend isn't an emergency then I don't know what is!

A virgin whose sexual expertise comes from watching hentai is explaining the mechanics of sex to an elf girl who thought you could get pregnant by kissing someone, but only on their lips. You couldn't make this stuff up.

By the end, Emilia was blushing furiously but she also seemed to be digesting what she'd been told. "So people do that when they want to have babies?"

"Well, people do that for a lot of reasons," Subaru replied slowly.

"Like what?"

"Well, it feels really good. And it's a good way of experiencing... intimacy with another person," Subaru explained.

"Have you had sex?"

"Nope," Subaru replied.

Huh. Normally that admission would be embarrassing. Right now it's probably the least embarrassing element of the

conversation, Subaru thought.

"What did you mean by 'experiencing intimacy?'"

"Well," Subaru said, struggling to put the concept into words. "It's kind of like... kissing. It's wanting to be close to someone, as close as possible. It's wanting to share... the closest experience that two people can share."

"Do you want to be 'intimate' with me?" Emilia asked matter-of-fact.

Oh shit. Is there a right answer to this question? Somebody throw me a life preserver, I'm drowning here! Subaru thought.

Subaru coughed. "Yes. I do want to. But that is something... we will do... when we both feel ready. I'm in no hurry. I'm guessing it's normally done after marriage on this world anyway."

"Is it different where you come from?" She asked.

"Yeah, sex is a lot more casual back home."

"Then why haven't you had sex?"

Because in my former life I was a pathetic loser who rarely left his bedroom and no sane woman would touch me with a ten foot pole?

Subaru shrugged. "I never found the right woman," He said.

"But now you think that I'm the right woman?" Emilia asked with a slight blush.

"Yes," Subaru said, blushing as well.

"Well, I mean if you wanted to do... that, I think we could-" She said uncomfortably.

"You know, Mili," Subaru interrupted. "I think the wonderful part of romance is that things happen naturally. They happen when both people are comfortable enough with each other for them to happen."

Wait, why am I trying to talk her out of this? Am I really that big a wimp? If she's willing why shouldn't we just do it? Subaru asked himself.

Well, it's partly because: yes, you really can be that big a wimp. If you're this embarrassed by just talking about sex, picture yourself trying to do it. First time sex is always awkward but this would just be brutal. The other problem is that Emilia really isn't ready for this, no matter what she says and you know it. She might do it for you because she loves you, but don't you think Emilia deserves better than that? To be your experiment? If you really love her shouldn't you be willing to wait until she can be an equal participant in the experience rather than her just being a passenger along for the ride?

Wait a second. Did I really just think that?

Emilia might do it for me... because she loves me.

Because she loves me... could she... could she really start to love me?

Emilia gave him a half smile. "I guess if I tried to do that right now I'd be pretty embarrassed," She admitted, shaking Subaru out of his internal reverie.

"Yup, me too," Subaru replied. "But I think that one day, not too long from now, you'll think back to this moment and you'll think it was funny that you were ever worried about being embarrassed in front of me."

Emilia smiled at him.

"There is, of course, a bright side to this whole situation," Subaru added.

"What's that?"

"Now that you know that kisses won't get you pregnant, I'm hoping that I can get a lot more of them!" Subaru replied.

Emilia laughed. "I guess kisses aren't as big a deal as I thought."

"Mili," Subaru said in mock offense, pulling her onto his lap and wrapping his arms around her. "Kisses are an incredibly big deal!"

Emilia smiled at him and leaned in for a kiss.

It was another half an hour before Subaru and Emilia got downstairs which badly held up breakfast. It would have taken even longer except Felt, who was born hungry, came looking for them to find out what the holdup was.

Felt's mocking had been merciless as they finally got down to the table.

"You know, Felt, one day you'll be where I was," Subaru told her as he and Emilia took their seats. "And on that day, I promise to show you all the care and consideration you just gave me."

"Does the entire household need to discuss you and Lady Emilia's activities?" Ram asked in a bored tone.

"No, but I have a feeling that they will," Subaru sighed.

Reinhard and Felt dug into breakfast and a few minutes later Beatrice and Puck joined them at the dining table.

Subaru glanced at Rem and Ram who were standing nearby.

"You know, ladies, I don't think any of us currently here are particularly formal. You are welcome to sit and eat with us," Subaru said.

"That would be a breach of protocol," Ram said.

"I'm giving you permission-" Subaru started.

"We do *not* have permission," Ram snapped.

"Jeez, lady, lighten up! Subaru is trying to be nice to you-" Felt protested through a mouthful of eggs.

"Felt," Subaru interrupted. "I know from your experiences with Elsa that you have the world's worst 'stranger danger' sense so please try to learn from my mistakes: Never make Ram angry."

Felt looked at Subaru in confusion. "I thought Red said it was the blue haired maid who tried to kill you?"

Rem started at this.

"It was. Please let that provide context when I say that Ram is the one you really don't want to make angry," Subaru emphasized.

Felt thought about it then looked nervously up at Ram.

Ram sniffed.

Reinhard snapped his fingers. "Oh, Subaru, I forgot to give you this last night," He said, handing Subaru a large bag full of gold coins.

Subaru looked down at the enormous bag in awe. "Red, I can't take this from you!"

Reinhard frowned. Then his eyes widened. "Oh! It's not from me! This is the reward that the kingdom offers for the live capture of enemy officers."

"Oh, really?" Subaru said. "How much is it?"

"A Gusteko captain is worth six hundred gold pieces," Reinhard said.

Felt gave a low whistle.

"Well, at least our camp isn't broke anymore. We can finance some of our ideas. That's nice," Subaru commented to Emilia.

"OK, after breakfast," Subaru said. "I'd like to have a group meeting to go over some of the ideas that Emilia and I have come up with for the royal selection. Beatrice, if you're willing, I'd like to have you there too."

Beatrice snorted and looked away.

Well, she didn't respond with a flat 'no' so that's promising, Subaru thought.

"I'd also like you and Rem to attend if you're not too busy," Subaru told Ram.

"Why would we be involved?" Ram asked in a bored tone.

"Because Lord Roswaal isn't here and he deserves to have his interests represented. And you are the representatives of his interests," Subaru replied.

Ram stiffened then nodded. "I should attend to a few things first then," She said, walking out of the room.

"Take your time," Subaru called, watching Felt empty yet another plate. "I think we might be here awhile."

"OK," Subaru said as everyone gathered in the sitting room and Rem served tea. "So, Emilia and I are planning a campaign along a few points. We think the best strategy is a mixture: three parts economic improvements to one part defense. We think we have solid ideas for two of the economic planks of our platform. We have one economic plank that's pretty iffy, and currently we have no idea what we're going to do about defense," Subaru said.

"What do you mean by 'defense?'" Reinhard asked.

"The primary responsibility of any ruler is to ensure peace and safety to his people," Subaru explained. "If Emilia and I expect to be elected, we need to prove to everyone in the kingdom that we can do that. In a way, we got lucky with the attack on Arlem because we established that our faction can protect our people. That said I'm not sure if that minor skirmish was enough to convince everyone. We might need more. What we would do to demonstrate our capabilities is

something we haven't figured out yet."

"Our first economic platform is what we call 'The Green Revolution,'" Subaru explained. "We're planning to introduce some advanced farming techniques from my homeland to help generate an explosion of food productivity as well as raise the quality of available foods."

Reinhard grinned. "Marvelous!" Reinhard knew nothing at all about farming but his lord bringing tools and techniques from another world could only be beneficial to the kingdom.

"Today, I'm planning to go talk to the Chief of Arlem and see if he's interested in these new techniques and to get an estimate of how hard it would be to adopt them. Emilia, I'd like you to come if you don't mind. I think it would be good for us to be together when we're explaining this."

"That's fine, but you'll still have to do most of the explaining," Emilia replied with a smile.

Subaru gave her a grin.

"Reinhard and Felt, it would also be nice if you would come and just try to follow along. I know you're not farmers but it might be useful for all of us to have a basic understanding of the concept before we go back to the capitol."

Reinhard and Felt nodded.

Subaru continued, "We're also hoping to talk to Lord Roswaal about getting permission to apply these techniques to Arlem and other villages-"

"In his missive," Ram interrupted, sipping her tea, "Lord Roswaal gave instructions for the villagers of his realm to listen to instruction from you and Lady Emilia in his absence."

Subaru paused for a moment. *That was certainly very... convenient. Why would he send that message? What even made him think we would be doing anything with the villagers?*

"Great," Subaru said awkwardly. "So that's item number one. Does anyone have any thoughts?"

"Me," Felt said raising her hand, "If this 'Green thingy' of yours is going to disrupt the farms then will it send more people to the slums? Because, truthfully, I don't think we can fit many more."

"It shouldn't," Emilia assured her. "In fact, we're hoping that this idea will help us empty the slums. If these techniques work here like they did in Subaru's world then these improvements will set up an explosion in food production and raise the demand for farm labor considerably. We're hoping to train the slum dwellers as farm hands and get them out of the city and back out into the country where they can find good homes and good jobs."

Felt looked mildly impressed.

"And since Felt already brought it up, platform two is to empty the slums," Subaru continued.

Felt burst out in applause.

Subaru waited in bemusement for a minute until Felt calmed down and stopped clapping.

"Thank you for your applause," He said dryly, "OK, so we want to tear down the slums for both moral and economic reasons. It should in no way be controversial to say that in this nation *everybody* should go to bed at night with a full belly, clothes on their back, and a roof over their heads. It *shouldn't* be controversial to say that, but apparently it is," Subaru corrected himself. "Like Emilia said, the plan for emptying the slums depends heavily on the Green revolution taking off and increasing the demand for labor. We're also going to have to try to make inroads in the slums so that people trust us when we come offering jobs and they don't think we're trying to trick them and sell them to slavers."

"They'd still sign up for it, believe me," Felt muttered.

Subaru sighed. "Rather than explore that remark, one thing that we will definitely need for this project is information. Felt, can you read and write?"

"Sure. Gramps taught me," She said.

"Perfect. Felt, I want to offer you a job."

"What am I stealing?" Felt said, only half joking.

"Nothing!" Subaru said cheerfully. "In fact your stealing days are behind you! I really really don't want to have to explain to people why a member of my faction is working nights as a pickpocket. So from now on, no stealing! You are officially retired!"

"Alright, alright, already!" Felt yelled.

"Felt, how much did you make when you normally worked a job?" Subaru asked.

"You mean a legal job? Usually about three coppers a day."

Subaru stared at her. "Damn, Felt, how do you live on that?"

"I couldn't. Hence the stealing," She said as if talking to a child.

"OK... how about I offer you two silvers a day? Sound fair?"

Judging by the way Felt's eyes lit up it sounded just fine.

"OK, let's say you work for me five days a week and take the weekend off. We'll give you a gold coin at the end of every week," Subaru said.

"Sounds great, what's the job?" Felt asked.

"I want you to collect stories," Subaru said.

"Stories?"

"Before we can empty the slums, we need to find out why people end up down there. We need to know what happened to put them in the slums so that we can stop the cycle," Subaru explained.

"We need you to talk to the people down there who wouldn't be willing to talk to us," Emilia continued Subaru's point, "Find out why they ended up down there, what they were doing before they got there, and what skills they possess so we can try to find them employment elsewhere."

"Sounds easy enough," Felt shrugged.

"Currently our plans for emptying the slums lean heavily on increasing the demand for labor," Subaru continued. "But before we can make more targeted plans, we need some real numbers and some idea who the slum dwellers are, how they got there, and what skills they have."

Subaru looked around the room. "Any questions?"

"Forgive me for saying this," Reinhard said. "I share your disgust with their living conditions and believe that the kingdom has a moral duty to improve their lives, but will doing so actually win you and Lady Emilia support in the election?"

"Not by itself, no," Subaru answered. "That's why we're tying it to economic concerns."

"Finding work for the people in the slums increases our labor force," Emilia added, "It will raises tax revenues, frees up city land for development and cuts the large amount of money that the kingdom spends every year managing problems in Lowtown."

"Sheesh, you guys are starting to sound like real politicians," Felt said. "That wasn't a compliment by the way."

"People can agree with us because it's the right thing to do or because it's the cheap thing to do," Subaru shrugged. "The important part is: they agree."

"Our third and final economic platform," Subaru continues, "Involves a machine from my homeland called a 'sewing machine.' This is basically a tool that allows people to sew lots of garments incredibly fast without working themselves to death."

"Where could you possibly find one of those?" Reinhard asked.

"Can't," Subaru shrugged. "I'll have to make one. I *think* I remember enough about how they work to do it but I haven't seen one in years and I haven't worked with these kind of tools in even longer. I'm not sure if I can even come close. It's very possible that I'll fail," Subaru shrugged.

"*When* Subaru succeeds," Emilia emphasized, "We plan to find craftsmen in Lagunica or Kararagi who can mass produce these machines. Then we'll use them to give all of our seamstresses a massive leap over the competition in every other country. Lagunica will become the textile capitol of the world."

"Also increasing the demand for labor and providing jobs with an easily learned skill," Subaru finished. "Any questions?"

The room was silent.

"OK, well that's it for now," Subaru said. "We have an appointment with the farmers in Arlem this afternoon. Until then we can enjoy ourselves."

Felt walked away to go exploring. Reinhard followed her. It wasn't *completely* certain that he was motivated by a desire to keep her out of trouble.

Emilia took Puck and walked away giving Subaru a smile. Emilia had thought it would be good to spend some quality time alone with Puck and Subaru had approved of that plan.

Rem and Ram walked away to begin their chores and this just left Subaru and Beatrice alone.

"Beako," Subaru asked, kneeling down to look Beatrice in the eye. "Can you do me a big favor?"

Beatrice sniffed. "Why would Betty do you a favor, I suppose?"

"Because if you do, I'll keep arranging for you to have more quality time with Puck?" Subaru suggested.

Beatrice choked and then looked at Subaru suspiciously. "And what would be this favor, I suppose?"

"Could you teach me how to read?" Subaru said plaintively.

Beatrice took Subaru to her library and pulled a large book of fairy tales off of the shelf. Beatrice sat down beside Subaru on the futon and proceeded to give him instruction.

"Those are the letters of the alphabet. You will need to take a long time to learn them, I suppose, but after that you should be able to read," Beatrice said pompously.

Well, a short alphabet is way better than having to learn all the characters in a Kanji-type language. Maybe this won't be so bad, Subaru mused.

Since there were only about thirty letters in the alphabet, Subaru picked them up surprisingly quickly. In less than two hours he was stumbling his way through his first short story.

Well, either Beako is an amazing teacher or this is another sign of Reason and Judgment's unspecified benevolence that may or may not have a large price tag attached. Yeah, not going to think about that right now, Subaru thought firmly.

Subaru had been reading for a few minutes. Beatrice sat there waiting for an opportunity to correct him but one did not provide itself.

Eventually, Subaru finished reading Beatrice the story about an evil witch who punished sinners by breaking their bodies apart.

Damn, were fairy tales this gruesome back home? Subaru wondered.

"Hm. You did reasonably well, I suppose," Beatrice sniffed.

"You're a good teacher," Subaru complimented. "I feel like with your help I'll pick this up quickly."

Beatrice turned a little red and glanced away. "Then you are expecting Betty to give you more lessons, I suppose? You had better give Betty more time with Bubby then!"

"I will," Subaru agreed easily, "Actually, I was thinking I owe you a little more than that. You once told me you were looking for somebody, maybe I could help you find them?"

Beatrice stared at Subaru for a long moment then she looked away and crossed her arms. "And you think that you could find someone that the Great Spirit Betty could not, I suppose!" Beatrice snorted.

Interesting. She didn't say 'no' but this is clearly a sore topic for her. I wonder why that is? Subaru mused.

"Well, Beako, I'm actually really good at finding things," Subaru said. "I mean I found your library pretty quick-"

Betty glowered at him.

Oh, smooth move, Subaru. Keep this up and you're going to be mulch, Subaru thought.

"And I'm sure Puck told you how I managed to find Emilia's insignia in a strange town after only seeing the thief for a second!" Subaru hurried along, "I bet I could help you find the person you're looking for."

Beatrice hesitated and looked up at Subaru with an unclear expression.

"How long have you been looking for them?" He asked.

Beatrice snorted again and melodramatically looked away. "Betty is not looking for 'that person.' 'That person' is looking for Betty! And Betty must remain here and guard the library until 'that person' comes, I suppose!"

Oh boy. That doesn't sound too good. Who exactly is she waiting for? Does she even know? And how would she even recognize them if they did come? Subaru thought. *This is a touchy subject for Beako. If I don't tread lightly I'm going to get blasted out the door again. I don't want to have to pay Roswaal for any more damaged walls.*

"Well, who told you about them?" Subaru asked.

For a moment it seemed as if Beatrice wasn't going to answer, then she murmured, "Betty's mother bade her to guard the Great Library until 'that person' came to take possession of it."

"Well, could we go and ask your mother for more information?" Subaru suggested.

Beatrice was quiet for a long time. Subaru didn't rush her, waiting for her to answer in her own time.

"Betty lost her mother four hundred years ago in fact," She finally whispered.

Wait. Four hundred years?! She's been waiting in this library for someone to come for four hundred years? Strike that- at least four hundred years? Subaru thought in both amazement and horror.

Beatrice has been waiting here alone for all that time. Day after day after day, just... waiting. Waiting for someone to come rescue her. I guess waiting for a miracle. Funny, you could have almost said the same thing about me back home.

All I did was sit in my room... waiting. I wasn't even sure what I was waiting for but I think deep down... I always knew it wasn't going to happen. When I gave up on myself, the world gave up on me. It was never going to send anyone to pry me out of that room.

Subaru looked around Beatrice's library with a fresh sense of dismay.

Beatrice is just like me. A person forgotten by the world. A world that moved on without us and never cared if we caught up or not.

Subaru sighed and shook his head. Subaru had always been annoyed by Beatrice and her tsundere attitude but now he felt a strange sense of kinship with her. His parents had at least tried to coax him out of his room. Beatrice's mother had ordered her to stay in the library and Beatrice had obeyed. In a way, he and Beatrice were two sides of the same coin.

Well, except I got lucky. The world didn't completely forget about me. I still had my parents. They never gave up on me, even though they should have. And the world didn't give up on me either. It gave me exactly what I needed: it sent me here. It knew I wanted to be a hero and it gave me a chance to be one. I have people who respect me, who need me now. I even have people who might learn to love me if they're given enough time.

So what about Beako? What makes her so much less special? She's been waiting here for four hundred years! Why isn't the world trying to rip her out of her shell and give her another chance? What? Is the world on a coffee break?!

OK, fuck it. Beatrice would never admit it, even if she had to sit here for ten thousand years, but she needs help. She needs a hero. I'm the only person here so I guess I might as well volunteer. But how do I help her? Who is this person she's waiting for? And how would she recognize them? Man, I'm really about to bite off way more than I can chew.

"OK, well then, we know one important thing about this person: they have a lousy sense of direction," Subaru said cheerfully, kneeling down in front of Beatrice to look her in the eye. "Getting lost for four hundred years? Who does that?"

Beatrice blinked at Subaru.

"Well, Beako, I think you've been waiting for this person long enough. It's time we go find them. You and me are going to go run this person down. And then I might yell at them for leaving Beako alone for all this time. That's just friggin' mean!" Subaru said.

"What are you talking about, I suppose?" Beatrice asked in confusion.

"I'm saying that we're going to find this person. You waited for four hundred years. And that is more than long enough. It's time we got proactive and found this person ourselves. I'm going to help you find them," Subaru said.

Beatrice stared at Subaru. "Betty is... Many people have offered to become 'that person' for Betty, I suppose... no one has ever offered to help Betty find 'that person...'" She whispered.

"Well, that's what I'm saying," Subaru said firmly. "We are going to find 'that person' and I am going to give them a piece of my mind for letting Beako be alone for so long!"

"Subaru..." Beatrice whispered. Subaru thought this was the first time Beatrice had ever said his name. "Why are you trying to help Betty?"

Subaru was tempted to laugh and make a joke: *Oh, well you're teaching me how to read, I just don't want to be in debt to a drill haired loli tsundere!*

No. Bad idea. The look in Beatrice's eye says she's feeling truly vulnerable right now. She deserves to be dealt with honestly.

"Because you need me to," Subaru replied with a shrug, "Because you're hurting. Because you're lonely. Because... Betty is in pain and Betty doesn't deserve to be in pain. I want Betty to be happy and I'll do whatever I need to do in order to make Betty happy. And if that means I need to hunt down someone who has been lost for four hundred years then that's just what I have to do."

Beatrice was silent and her lip trembled.

Subaru gently extended his hand to Beatrice. She hesitated a moment and then placed her own tiny hand in his palm.

"I'll find 'that person' with you or I'll die trying," Subaru promised, meaning every word.

Subaru's words had felt right in the moment. However, on reflection just a short while later, they felt irrational and profoundly silly.

Boldly said, Subaru. You promised to help Beako find her person. Good for you. Got a strategy for how you're going to pull that off? Where do you even start? Are you just going to wander around the world with Beatrice on your shoulder asking people at random: 'Are you that person?' You'll probably have folk songs being written about 'the wandering lunatic and his drill-haired loli' before you ever come close to finding him, Subaru thought.

Subaru, Emilia, Felt, and Reinhard were in a carriage riding down to Arlem that afternoon. Surprisingly, Beatrice and Puck had come along without even being asked. Subaru expected Puck to come but Beatrice tagging along struck him

as encouraging. She sat next to Subaru, not speaking to him but glancing his way every so often.

To make matters even worse, Beatrice doesn't seem to know anything about this person. Her entire knowledge of them is summoned up in one sentence: 'The person Betty is waiting for; the person who will inherit Mother's library.'

How would she even recognize 'that person' if she met them? Is she really expecting some person to simply walk into the library one day and say: "I am that person. Sorry I'm so late?"

Unfortunately, yes, I feel like that is what she is waiting for. But she said that people did come into the library saying that and that she had rejected them. No, wait. She said that people had come to the library telling her that they could become that person. That isn't the same thing at all. So... what is the solution? Walk into the library and say: 'Good news Beako. I used Reason and Judgment and figured out that I am that person. Funny, huh?' Well... that might actually work...

No, you asshole. Beatrice has been waiting for this person for four hundred years. She deserves better than a fake out! Even a fake out motivated by the best of intentions.

So, how can I find this person? I doubt Reason and Judgment's magic is going to help all that much in this case. We know that he's supposed to inherit the library and... well that's about it. So from that information I can deduce that this person... knows how to read? Maybe?

Wow. I used to think that my telling Emilia we'd rule the country was going to be a hard promise to keep. I have so much more perspective now.

"-turnips and clover can be undersown during the harvest in early autumn. Turnips and clover grow relatively quickly and they are pretty cold tolerant so if the weather cooperates, you should have full fields of grazing material through most of the winter. Cows, sheep, and pigs can graze on these fields to stay healthy through the cold months and the dung they drop on the fields is full of nutrients after eating the vitamin rich turnips and clover. Come spring time you should have refreshed fields ready to bear corn or wheat without requiring fallowing," Subaru finished.

Subaru had just given a speech on agricultural techniques and crop variations that would have done a professional farmer proud. The sheer amount of information that Subaru recalled from a single three month class which he'd taken years ago, which hadn't interested him, and a class which he had virtually slept through, had officially crossed the line into completely, utterly, nonsensically preposterous.

Subaru decided not to think too much about this or to what extent *Reason and Judgment* was affecting his mind.

Subaru stood surrounded by the entire village. He had originally been expecting to only speak to a few of the more influential farmers but word had spread of his presentation and the entire village had asked to sit and listen to their new hero's words. Subaru couldn't think of any reason to refuse.

Felt, Reinhard, and the spirits sat on a nearby fence. They had been silent throughout the entire presentation. The spirits had no real interest in crops and were only partially listening. Reinhard was being attentive but Subaru knew he had left the knight behind quickly during his speech. Felt, despite never having been on a farm in her life, actually looked like she was processing the information and understood it.

Huh. I always thought Felt was clever. Recruiting her was probably a good idea, Subaru thought.

The only other person who had spoken during this presentation was Emilia by Subaru's request. He had asked Emilia to please interject every time a question was asked that she thought she knew the answer to. This was mostly a matter of optics and ensuring that the people associated Emilia with this idea as much as Subaru. Emilia had answered several questions during the discussion and had proved herself to be well prepared. Emilia stood beside him during the entire presentation so that the village understood that this was one proposal shared by two people.

The villagers appeared to be mulling Subaru's suggestions over.

"It's an interesting idea," One farmer allowed. "It sounds feasible."

"I don't see any flaws but it's risky," Another pointed out. "We've done things a certain way for generations. Changing that is risky."

"Yeah, but how well are those ways working? We're barely getting through the winter," A third said.

"That's the problem," The second farmer retorted. "If this works just a *little* worse than our current plans our winters could go from being hard to desperate."

"Lord Subaru," The Village Chief interrupted. "This new strategy your proposing sounds like we'd need to bring in animals to make it work."

"Exactly," Emilia jumped in, "Turnips are wonderful food sources for pigs and cows and they're especially good for... nursing mothers," Emilia said flushing.

Subaru bit his lip to avoid laughing as he remembered the conversation about maternity that Subaru and Emilia had endured this morning.

"In addition to increasing the productivity of your fields," Emilia said, taking Subaru's hand and squeezing it hard enough to hurt. Subaru looked at Emilia and behind her 'benevolent teacher' expression, he saw a large flash of

annoyance in her eye. This only made Subaru want to laugh harder. "The increased availability and health of domesticated livestock in your community will increase your access to milk and meat. This will improve your diet and provide you with more resources to sell at market."

The villagers murmured among themselves and the sound was cautiously approving. The prospect of more food and more variety appealed to the villagers for obvious reasons.

"And this technique works well in your homeland?" The Chief asked.

"Yes," Subaru emphasized. Subaru had worried that the villagers might start asking him where he had come from that used such strange techniques but so far nobody seemed interested. He supposed that few of the villagers ever went far from their home so they had no conception of much of the wider world or how unusual the story Subaru was telling really was. "These techniques were extremely successful in my homeland at providing much more food to the populace. I want to emphasize that *you* know these lands, I don't. The crops I've described are *a* way of doing things but I don't believe for a moment that they are the *best* way of doing things. As you experiment with different crop cycles you'll likely find superior combinations that work even better for your own lands."

"Lord Subaru," The Chief asked. "Assuming we wanted to implement these techniques, how would we begin?"

"Well, it's really too late in the spring to do a full shift," Subaru explained, having already thought about this question. "You have fields that you've left fallow this year and you really can't sow them with any greedy crop. You've exhausted the soil and it really does need to rest and recover before you can produce more high quality crops. But you could grow turnips and clover in them this year and have feed for any new animals you acquire. If you start soon you might even get several harvests out of the fields and ensure that the animals have plenty of grazing land through the year. The healthier the animals are, the better the manure they'll provide, and the more they'll benefit you."

By the time the meeting had ended, Subaru had a splitting headache. The village had become extremely excited about Subaru's suggestions and this weighed on him heavily.

I'm never grown a vegetable in my life! How confident am I that this is really going to work? What if it's a complete disaster and I lead the people of Arlem into a famine?!

I mean, quite aside from that probably killing any chance at the selection or getting Emilia the Dragon blood, people could actually die because of my screw up! Am I really willing to accept that responsibility?

Subaru sighed, *Any options you had of backing out are way behind you now. The villagers trust you and they're trying your ideas because of that trust. You are responsible for what happens to them; like it or not.*

I should probably prepare for the worst case scenario. If it is a disaster and the crops all fail, what do I do?

I suppose I should start preparing a nest egg. That should help both Arlem and the royal selection: in both cases I'll need money. That huge bag of gold Reinhard brought will definitely help. If the crops fail this autumn then I'll be able to use all that gold to buy food for the villagers. It won't re-earn their trust but at least they won't die because of my stupidity.

Subaru and company delayed their return to the manor to visit Petra's house. Petra had once again turned bright red upon seeing Subaru but this time she managed to stammer out: "Hello, Lord Subaru," She squeaked.

"You really don't have to call me 'Lord', Petra." Subaru told her.

She turned even redder and then clammed up.

"Hello, Petra," Emilia said.

"Big sis!" Petra looked delighted and ran over to throw her arms around Emilia.

Emilia looked so cute kneeling down beside Petra and talking to her about everything the village girl had done recently that Subaru stopped what he was doing just to watch them. He was only reminded of his business here when Petra's mother spoke to him: "Lord Subaru, this is an unexpected pleasure," The woman sank into a rough curtsy. "What can I do for you?"

"Ah yes," Subaru remembered himself. "I need a few supplies for something I'm working on. Can I buy two spools of thread and a bolt of cloth from you?"

The woman looked at Subaru in surprise. "If you need any sewing work done, I'd be happy to do it for you, Lord Subaru."

"Oh, this isn't about sewing it's just a project I'm working on. It's for research," Subaru replied.

The woman seemed a bit confused but stepped back into her cottage. "Any particular color?" She called.

"Doesn't matter," Subaru answered.

The seamstress returned with a bolt of red cloth and two spools of thread: blue and green. "Here you go, my Lord. Please accept these with my compliments," She said, handing them to Subaru with another curtsy.

"Thank you, kind Lady," Subaru took the items. "Please accept this with *my* compliments," Subaru offered her one of the

gold coins that Reinhard had brought back.

The seamstress looked shocked. "Oh no, my Lord! That is far too much!"

"Think fast!" Subaru flipped the coin into the air and Petra's mother instinctively caught it before it hit the ground.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Ms. Leyte," Subaru said with a smile, walking back over to Emilia as Petra's mother continued to express her profuse gratitude.

Petra noticed Subaru approaching and quickly said goodbye to Emilia, fleeing back to the safety of her mother.

Subaru and Emilia both waved goodbye to Petra and her mother and then they walked hand in hand back to the carriage.

"You know, Petra was telling me some very interesting things," Emilia said, sounding quite amused.

"Oh?"

"Apparently she has a rather large crush on you, Subaru," Emilia said with a smile.

"Oh dear," Subaru said in mock concern. "I do hope you let her down easy when you told her that my heart already belongs to someone else."

"You're in love with someone? She would have to be amazing," Emilia said, trying to joke but not quite managing it and sounding morose. "You deserve someone amazing. Someone really really special. Do I know her?"

Subaru laughed and kissed her hand, "Obviously you don't know her as well as I do."

After returning to the manor, Emilia decided to spend some time doing research in the library. Subaru had located an old abandoned writing desk in the stable while helping put away the carriage and he asked if he could bring it inside.

This resulted in Subaru, Reinhard, Rem, and Ram carrying the desk to an isolated room that Subaru could use as a workshop for his experiment. Actually, it was really just Rem and Reinhard who carried it. Ram refused to even touch the dusty old desk and Subaru was well aware that his contributions in moving it hindered more than they helped.

After putting it down, Ram left without comment and Rem gave Subaru and Reinhard a respectful bow before hurrying after her sister.

"Thanks, Rem!" He called after her.

"So, you plan to turn this into your 'sewing machine?' Reinhard asked.

"Well, that's the plan. No promises," Subaru said ruefully as Beatrice walked into the room with Puck.

"Do you think there's any way I can assist?" Reinhard asked.

Subaru made a face. "Sadly, I don't think so. This is going to be done completely using my brain, which means we are most likely screwed."

Reinhard laughed. "Be of good cheer, my friend. The Lady Emilia and I have great confidence in you and I'm certain you won't let us down."

"Oh great, no pressure," Subaru chuckled.

"Well, if you will not require my assistance at the moment, I think I will go look for Felt," Reinhard said.

"Good idea. I'm already budgeting a few hours for us to count the silver before we go back to the capitol. Let's not make it worse by letting her roam around unsupervised," Subaru said.

Reinhard laughed as he left the room.

Subaru looked at Beatrice who was sitting in a nearby chair cuddling Puck. "He thinks I'm joking," He mouthed to Beatrice.

Beatrice did not respond.

"You know, I'm glad you're here Beako," Subaru said. "I wanted to talk to you some more about 'that person.'"

Subaru showed Puck the pictures he had drawn of a variety of gears that he would need as well as a sewing machine frame and a needle. Puck had used magic to provide all of these at Subaru's request and then gone off to be with Emilia.

Two hours later, it was nearly dinner time. Beatrice and Subaru had spent the entire time talking about 'that person' but no real new information had presented itself. Beatrice had been given nothing but a brief mission statement and everything she knew about the person she had spent centuries waiting for was based on supposition.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you how you would identify 'that person?'" Subaru asked, trying to veil his irritation. Subaru had no idea who Puck and Beatrice's mother was but he would have loved to bring her up on charges of

negligent parenting.

"She said I would know, I suppose," Beatrice said in a somber voice.

Subaru hid his face when he scowled so Beatrice wouldn't see.

I would love to be in a locked room with that woman for about fifteen minutes, Subaru thought. On second thought, whatever kind of creature created both Puck and Beatrice is bound to be way out of my weight class but the sentiment remains valid. I'd love to be in a locked room with her for about five seconds. Just let me out when Indomitable turns off.

Subaru had managed connect the gears and the needle into the sewing machine frame so that when the gears turned the needle went up and down. So now the easy part was done at least.

"Beako, let's try this from another perspective. What is the library? What is it for?" Subaru asked, trying to think about how to connect the existing gears to a pedal.

Crap, how do you turn a pedal into rotational energy? I don't think any of my Lego sets even had a pedal. Up and down motions to generate rotational energy aren't very common I guess.

Subaru stared a blank piece of paper as he tried to figure out what kind of gear he'd need to ask Puck to make next. He was sure that he'd seen something that could do this. In the meantime, Subaru sketched out a spring for the pedal, he knew he'd need one of those anyway.

"The library is the repository of all of mother's vast knowledge," Beatrice replied.

Fabulous, another explanation that doesn't explain anything! Is Beako doing this on purpose? Subaru mused.

"OK..." Subaru said. This needed to be phrased delicately. "Tell me about your mother. What kind of person was she?"

"Betty's mother was the best and smartest person who ever lived and she doted on Betty and she gave Betty her important task," Beatrice replied.

That is not an adequate description, Subaru sighed as he finished drawing his spring.

"My point was that if 'that person' was intended to inherit your mother's library, then he has to have some connection with your mother. She must have wanted her knowledge to go to someone who would use it to solve the problems that she cared about right? So what was your mother working on when she... died?" Subaru asked.

"Everything, I suppose," Beatrice answered.

Wait! I remember a weird gear that had a shaft sticking out of its side! So if the shaft was moved up and down the gear would have to turn. Is that right? Seems a little fragile. I mean the shaft would have to be just the right length and in just the position, otherwise the gear would probably roll back and forth rather than around.

Wait. Did Beatrice just say 'everything?'

"So your mother was working on... 'everything?'" Subaru repeated, starting to make a sketch of the new gear. "Define 'everything.'"

"Everything," Beatrice emphasized. "Mother despaired at the state of the world and was determined to fix it. She wanted to protect everyone from bad things happening and she dedicated all her knowledge to finding out how to do so."

So was Beatrice's mother crazy or a fool? I'm overwhelmed trying to fix a small village much less fix the whole world, Subaru thought.

"Well, that's kind of useful information, right?" Subaru said to Beatrice as he finished his sketch.

OK, that's it. I'm done for now, Subaru said standing up, *I need Puck to make the new gears anyway.*

Beatrice was staring at Subaru with moody eyes, her short legs kicking the air from her chair.

"If your mother was determined to save the world then we just need to find someone else who's trying to save the world. I bet she wanted the knowledge in the library to pass onto someone like that. It makes sense right?" Subaru asked her.

Beatrice mulled that over. "We find them, and we ask them are they 'that person,' I supposed?"

"Not exactly," Subaru said, walking over to Beatrice.

I need to be careful here. This has to be worded exactly right or she'll just reject it out of hand, Subaru thought.

"I'm starting to wonder if maybe your mother wanted you to select 'that person.' I think maybe she didn't just want you to sit in the library waiting for someone to tell you they were 'that person,' anyone could have done that, not just her precious daughter," Subaru continued, forestalling Beatrice's objection.

Beatrice had immediately opened her mouth to protest but closed it again.

"There had to be a reason that your mother entrusted this job to you. It had to be something important, something only Beako could do," Subaru continued.

If I'm phrasing this as speculation, does this mean I'm not flat out lying to that poor girl? Because I don't think there's anything going on here except that a mean self-centered woman gave her loving daughter a job and then completely forgot about her. All the same, I can't prove that to be true so I'm not... technically lying to Beako, right? Subaru mused.

"So what can you do that no one else in the world can? Well, you know your mother better than anyone else, right?" Subaru asked.

Beatrice immediately nodded.

"So you're the perfect person to identify and vet anyone who might want to take over her task of saving the world. Maybe you're not just waiting for someone to tell you that they're 'that person,' maybe someone out there needs you to tell them that they are 'that person.'" He finished.

Beatrice seemed to be seriously considering what Subaru said so he just knelt down next to her and was careful not to stir her while she thought.

"But that was never written in Betty's Gosp-" Beatrice cut herself off.

"In your what?"

"Never mind, I suppose," Beatrice looked down at her hands, deep in thought.

"Subaru," She asked in a small voice. "What if Betty's future... had stopped being written, had stopped changing? What would that mean?"

Subaru thought it over for a moment. If Beatrice was using his name, then this question was really important to her. It had to be answered carefully. "I think it means that you need to make some changes. You've been in the same room for four hundred years. You plan to stay in the same room for another four hundred years unless someone else tells you not to. How could your future *not* have stopped? If you don't change anything then nothing will change!"

Beatrice's eyes widened and something flickered deep inside them.

Well, that certainly made an impact but don't ask me why. I don't even know what I'm saying. I just want Beatrice to stop waiting passively for someone who might never come and go out and look for them. Even if she never finds this person, she'll be around other people. She'll make friends and see new things. She wouldn't be so heartbreakingly alone anymore.

"Subaru," Beatrice whispered. "Would you be Betty's-"

"Subaru, dinner is ready!" Emilia said, stepping into the room unseen and making them both jump.

"Thanks, Mili," Subaru said, pressing a hand against his rapidly beating heart.

Emilia smiled and left the room.

Subaru looked back at Beatrice but whatever she had planned to ask him, the moment had clearly passed.

"You should get down to dinner, I suppose." Beatrice said dismissively as she hopped off her chair.

"Good advice," Subaru agreed gently. He reached down and extended a hand to Beatrice. "Shall we?" He asked.

Beatrice looked up at Subaru with an unclear expression.

Subaru just waited smiling, his hand outstretched to the lonely little girl.

After some time, Beatrice timidly placed her hand into Subaru's and hand in hand they went to dinner.

After dinner, Beatrice retreated to her library and Subaru watched her go.

Beako needs to do some serious thinking and she needs to be alone for that. If I go after her right now I'll just push her away, Subaru mused. *I should talk to Puck about Beako in the morning, maybe he has some thoughts about how to help her. But since Puck's already gone to sleep, that does mean that I get Emilia all to myself!*

"Care to take a walk, Emilia?"

"You know, I love these," Subaru mused. "These times alone with you are the high point of my entire day."

"I would have to agree," Emilia replied. "We can just be ourselves out here. We don't need to work and study. We don't need to weigh our words for their impact. We don't need to worry about what everyone else thinks. It's nice to just be the two of us. Trying to think about everyone else can be a lot of pressure."

"I have a brilliant idea," Subaru said.

"What's that?"

"Let's run away," Subaru deadpanned.

Emilia laughed. "An interesting notion," She said, wrapping her arm around his. "I admit, I'm intrigued. Did you have any particular destination in mind or shall we just go skipping merrily down the road?"

Subaru shrugged. "I don't know. I figure as long as you're with me I could be pretty happy wherever we end up," Subaru thought about it a bit. "First off, let's cross Gusteko off the list. I hate the cold and they already tried to kill me once. I'm not going there," He said firmly.

Emilia laughed, "I think that sounds fair. You probably wouldn't like the Elixir Forest either then. The curse on the forest means that it's always cold."

Subaru looked at Emilia thoughtfully. "Actually, that would be a great trip idea."

"The Elixir Forest?" Emilia asked in surprise.

"Yeah. I'd like to get a peak at your roots. I mean, I can't show you my old home but I could go to see yours," Subaru explained.

Emilia grimaced. "That actually just puts into perspective how much effort you're putting into saving a place you've never been."

"I'm not trying to save a place, I'm trying to save people," Subaru replied with aplomb. "I've always cared deeply about the elvish people you know."

"Oh, and how many elves do you know?" Emilia smirked.

"Not many but the ones I do know are simply amazing," Subaru replied.

They came to a small stone bench under a shady tree. "Care to sit for a bit?"

The two sat down.

They looked out together at the starry night sky. Neither spoke for a bit.

"Subaru," Emilia murmured, "Do you really think we can win the royal selection?"

"It's a long shot," Subaru agreed, "But I'm starting to think that we won't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"At a certain point in the election, when two big players are decided, they're going to ask the rest of us what it would take for us to bow out of the race and let them focus on their major threat. Our asking price is really quite cheap: give us the blood and we'll back out and let them win the prize," Subaru shrugged.

Emilia was silent for a long moment. "But... is that the only reason we want to win? To get the blood?" She asked finally.

"What do you mean?"

Emilia hesitated, turning away from Subaru and looking out at the stars. "In the past few days you've come up with ideas to feed people and end hunger in Lagunica. You're trying to make a machine that will clothe the people who dress in drags. You really could make the kingdom a better place," She murmured.

Subaru laughed. "I don't know about that. I'm a pretty clueless politician. Besides, no matter who wins the selection I could still give the new king suggestions and ideas."

He paused. "What do you think you'll do if you got the throne?"

Emilia was quiet for a moment. "I'd really like to try to repair the fracture between the humans and the demi-humans," She admitted.

"I think that's a great idea," Subaru approved. "It's an ambitious goal but one that deserves careful planning and great effort. It's the kind of dream worthy of a King."

Emilia hung her head. "Honestly, it's just an excuse. I really am doing all of this just to get the blood! I am so selfish!" She spat at herself.

Subaru stared at her for a long moment and then sighed. "OK, Mili. Give!" He ordered.

"Give what?"

"What's really going on here?" Subaru demanded. "When you first gave me that ridiculous speech about how selfish you were for wanting to get the dragon blood to save your people, I just assumed you were a dope."

"What's a dope?"

"A dummy."

Emilia flinched, looking hurt.

"But now I've gotten to know you and I know you're not a dummy so what is really going on? Something about this is making you feel selfish and it's not some nebulous 'I'm only helping my own people' bullshit. I'm in this stupid selection up to my neck now so tell me why we're really doing this. I feel like I deserve to know the truth at this point," Subaru said.

Emilia turned white and looked away from him.

Subaru waited a moment and then slowly reached out to take Emilia's hand.

Emilia didn't turn to look at him but she didn't pull her hand away either.

"Is it something you're scared to talk about?" Subaru whispered.

Emilia hesitated then nodded.

Subaru squeezed her hand. "You can talk to me about anything, Mili," He replied.

She shook her head.

That hurt him a little but Subaru kept talking. "Emilia, I know bad people. You're not one of them. I don't believe that anything that you were involved in was anything worse than an unfortunate mistake."

"What if some mistakes are unforgivable?" She muttered. "What if... what if *you* can't forgive me?"

"I am on your side, Emilia. Now and always," He promised. Subaru cracked a smile. "Besides I have a pretty good track record for forgiving people. I forgave Rem for trying to murder me. I like you way more than I like Rem. You can assume I'll always forgive you."

Emilia sat silently with her head bowed for almost a full minute.

"I caused the disaster in the Elior forest," Emilia whispered.

Subaru didn't reply. He sat there waiting patiently.

After a moment, Emilia continued, "The forest was attacked. I don't really remember by what or why it happened but I... I froze the forest. I lost control of my magic. I turned every living creature in the forest to solid ice. They're all frozen because of me!" Emilia's voice broke. She started to cry. "That's why I *have* to get the blood. I have to save them because it's all my fault that they died!"

Emilia covered her face in her hands and sobbed.

Subaru stopped time with *Reason and Judgment*.

Damn. I promised I was going to stop using it so much. Still, Emilia really needs me right now. I need to think carefully about what to say.

Subaru felt his confidence and intelligence surging as he considered the weeping Emilia, frozen in place.

Hm. So that's why she's been so hard on herself about being selfish for her quest for the Dragon blood. At least this makes some sense.

Of course, the big question is how do you make her feel better, Subaru mused. The simplest strategy would likely be to just reassure her that you are going to acquire the blood for her. That will both make her feel better and reinforce her dependency on you.

Why were you so down on your chances to win the selection in the first place? You're a man from a vastly technologically superior culture. Crop rotations and a sewing machine are just the tips of the iceberg. Imagine a canon. You can certainly design one given enough time. Imagine a steam engine. You could create an entire industrial revolution. What other person in this world could possibly offer the people of Lagunica so much?

Beyond that, you're already a hero. Felt says that everything in town is going just according to plan: everyone is talking about Subaru Natsuki the invincible who slew a troll with his bare hands to protect the helpless villagers. Who else in the selection will have a public relations storm like that?

Granted it would be foolish to conclude that the selection is already resolved in your favor. A lot can happen in two years and it is even somewhat possible that someone else might take the lead. But even in this most unlikely scenario where you are denied the throne it is still entirely feasible for you to acquire the blood through negotiations with your rival. Even if the throne is in some doubt, possession of the blood is guaranteed. You should simply remind Emilia that you are on her side and that you will solve her problem. The blood will be hers and the matter will be dealt with.

Subaru was about to unfreeze time and execute this plan when he felt as if a quieter, more diffident voice in his mind had broken through his abiding confidence to intervene.

No, I'm not sure about this. I don't think that's really what Mili needs to hear. If I just give her the blood, if I'm the one who heals the elves, that won't assuage her guilt. She desperately wants to make up for her mistake. That's something to be admired. This is Mili's problem and she wants to take responsibility for it. I can't just solve it for her.

That's foolish. You're making this far too complicated, another part of Subaru answered himself. *You know that you absolutely can solve her problems and that you would solve them better than the lovely Emilia could ever hope to. She's*

lucky to have you on her team. It doesn't matter who solves the problem, so long as Emilia's guilt is assuaged. If the elves are saved then there's nothing to feel guilty about in the first place.

No, I'm not that stupid. This isn't just about saving the elves for Emilia it's about atoning for a mistake. Like it or not, this isn't my problem. I'm barely involved in this matter. This is about Mili. If I charge in like a white knight, sure the problem is solved but I don't think Emilia will feel any better. Honestly, I'm worried that my fixing the problem could make her feel like even more of a failure...

You don't need to over think this, Subaru, the other part replied. You will get the blood. Your victory is assured. So reassure her on that point. If she needs to feel more involved to assuage her guilt, simply assign Emilia a few small tasks to make her feel like she contributed adequately to the victory. She wants to feel better. She's not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. A potential side boon is that this would absolutely reinforce Emilia's dependency on you. You're still worried that she might abandon you someday. If you convince her that you will save her people and undo her great mistake then her investment in you would be complete. She would never even consider abandoning you again.

No. I can't do that to her. Mili needs support. She needs to know that I understand how she feels and that I understand why she's so driven to make amends. Most importantly she needs to know that one mistake, however tragic, doesn't define her whole life.

Subaru unfroze time before he could second guess himself any further.

Subaru slipped an arm around Emilia's shoulders. He coaxed her head to lay his shoulder and stroked her hair as she wept.

After a few minutes Emilia had cried herself out. She looked up at Subaru with watery eyes that expected condemnation.

"Emilia," He whispered. "You are the opposite of selfish."

Emilia's mouth dropped. "How can you say that? I only want the blood because it's my fault that everyone froze in the first place! I'm trying to escape my own guilt!"

"Nope," Subaru said casually.

"What do you mean, 'nope?!'"

"How many years did you stay in the forest with Puck after this disaster?"

Emilia frowned. "Um. About seven maybe?"

"If you just wanted to escape your guilt you would have left the forest. You would have walked away and made a new life for yourself somewhere where you weren't constantly reminded of your mistake," Subaru pointed out.

"I couldn't do that!" Emilia protested.

"I know that," Subaru agreed. "I would have expected no less from you."

Emilia was quiet against his shoulder. "I'm just trying to fix my own mistake," She sighed.

"You'd be surprised how few people would even bother doing *that* much," Subaru replied.

Emilia frowned doubtfully at Subaru.

Subaru bent down and kissed Emilia's forehead. "I'm really proud of you, Emilia," He said.

Emilia stared at Subaru wide eyed. "What? Why... Why would you say that?"

"Mili, I know you made a mistake that hurt a lot of people. You weren't one of the people who got hurt. But you've taken responsibility for that mistake and you're determined to fix it. Nobody forced you to try to make amends, you imposed this duty on yourself. You know you hurt others and you're determined to make up for it. That takes real courage. And real compassion."

Emilia stared up at Subaru in shock.

Subaru shrugged. "Like I keep telling you, Mili, you are the opposite of selfish. I'm really proud of you, Emilia. You'll make a great King."

Emilia's eyes filled up again and she cried. Subaru held her until her tears ran out.

The next morning after breakfast, Emilia and Puck retreated to the library to do research on human/demi-human relations and think about ways to improve them. Subaru went looking for Beatrice. He searched the manor until he found her library and entered to find Beatrice sitting on her stool staring at an enormous black book nearly as big as she was.

When Beatrice saw Subaru she immediately put the book down and put other books on top of it as if she was trying to hide it in the least subtle way imaginable.

"And what are you doing here? Come to bother Betty again, I suppose?"

"It's one of my favorite pastimes," Subaru agreed. He looked at Beatrice closely. She seemed tired and on edge this morning. Subaru guessed that she had spent most of the night thinking and whatever conclusions she had drawn were not to her liking.

Well, that could be a bad thing or a good thing. Her original worldview wasn't working for her. If she's accepting the need to change it, that would definitely be painful but it would be better for her in the long run, Subaru thought.

Subaru had actually come to talk to Beatrice more about 'that person' and Beatrice's quest but upon looking at her weary and drawn face he changed his mind. "I was going to go and try to do some more work on that sewing machine. I was wondering if I could persuade you to come along. Yesterday you pointed out a flaw that would have taken me all day to notice."

Subaru considered suggesting that they could talk more about the search for 'that person' then held his tongue. If Beatrice wanted to talk about it, she would bring it up.

"Hm. So you want Betty to help you, I suppose?" Beatrice sniffed.

Subaru sensed that he was on dangerous ground. "If you're willing to, yes," He said carefully.

"For centuries, people have come to the Great Library seeking to use the Great Spirit Beatrice!" She informed him.

Uh-Oh. "I am not trying to use you, Beako. I just asked if you would be willing to help me," Subaru said.

Beatrice didn't answer.

Subaru stepped over to the futon and eased himself down on it. "Do people often come here trying to... take advantage of your generosity?" Subaru asked.

Beatrice snorted. "People are always coming here to try and use Betty, I suppose. Betty is a Great Spirit! The guardian of Mother's vast knowledge. Everyone wants something from Betty!"

Subaru waited a moment. "And what does Betty want?" Subaru murmured.

Beatrice looked at Subaru with fire in her eyes. Subaru tensed, preparing to activate *Indomitable* in case Beatrice really lost it.

"Betty wants to finish this! Betty wants to complete her contract with Mother and be done with this!" Beatrice shouted.

"And find 'that person,'" Subaru nodded.

"Where are they?!" Beatrice screamed, "Why did they leave Betty alone all this time?! Why did Betty deserve to be trapped here for so long? Betty wasn't worth remembering, I suppose!"

Subaru hesitated. "Beatrice is absolutely worth remembering and she certainly didn't deserve to be trapped here. Something in your mother's plan must have gone wrong," Subaru said simply. "So now it falls to us to fix it, doesn't it?"

Beatrice glared at Subaru in silence. "You think that you are worthy to 'fix' mother's plan, I suppose? You think that you can do what Betty can't, I suppose?"

Subaru phrased his answer carefully. "I'm not saying either of those things. I'm saying that two people can often do what one person can't do alone. You've tried to fix it alone for centuries without success and dozens, maybe hundreds, of people have come into this library to ask for your help. I want to help *you*."

Beatrice looked away and stuck her nose in the air. "And you think that you're the first, I suppose?" She snapped.

"What do you mean?" Subaru murmured.

"Many have come into Mother's library with tears in their eyes: Offering to help, offering to save Betty in fact! Promising that they can make everything better, that they can cure Betty's loneliness!"

Subaru looked at the great spirit who held unshed tears in her eyes. "And how does that make you feel?"

"Feel? It makes me angry, in fact! Mortals think they can even imagine four hundred years of waiting, of loneliness?! Waiting for 'that person' to come?!"

Oh boy. Note to self: I need to be a lot nicer to Puck and a whole lot more considerate of his feelings about me and his daughter. If I'd been all alone for four hundred years or so, I'd be pretty scared of being left alone again too.

"They think that they can wash away Betty's misery and despair by holding her hand and patting her head, I suppose! They think that all Betty needs is a friend, in fact!" Beatrice shrieked, tears streaming down her face.

Subaru waited a moment. "None of them understand how you feel," He encouraged.

Beatrice whirled on him and pointed at Subaru as if casting a curse. "Neither do you, in fact!" Beatrice spat.

Subaru nodded. "You're right. I don't know how you feel. How could I? I'm eighteen. You've seen a hundred and eighty; twice over. I have absolutely no idea what that's like. I just know that you're in pain and you shouldn't be."

Beatrice panted for breath, staring at Subaru.

"That's why we're going to find 'that person,' right?" He asked.

Beatrice bit her lip. "Subaru, will you-"

"Betty, are you alright?" Puck said from behind Subaru.

Subaru turned around and saw Emilia and Puck standing in the doorway.

"We came to investigate, we heard yelling," Emilia said almost apologetically.

"Everything is OK," Subaru replied. "Right, Beatrice?"

Beatrice didn't answer.

Subaru left the library after Beatrice pulled out another book and sat there pretending to read it. He waited a few minutes before concluding that his presence was no longer welcome and went down to his workshop to keep working on the machine.

The machine was almost complete actually. However there was one component left to build and Subaru was struggling to remember it.

Mom's sewing machine had a gear underneath the needle. A weirdly shaped gear that... tied the stitches together somehow. Fuck I don't remember what it looked like, much less how it worked.

Actually maybe this is a good thing. It might suggest that there's a limit to Reason and Judgment's influence on my mind, although not being able to get this machine working might cripple our election chances. Maybe I can figure it out from first principles? Why don't I try to work it out without using Reason and Judgment? I did some sewing when I was younger, how would I make a good stitch using gears?

After two hours of brooding on the topic Subaru had gotten absolutely nowhere.

OK, fine. I'm not that smart. I don't know how to do these things. Asking Beatrice if she has any ideas might be an option but I don't think Beatrice wants to talk to me right now. Besides if I need to ask for her help on the sewing machine that will only undercut my argument later when I claim that I just want to help Beatrice. It'll just solidify her suspicions that I'm trying to use her. Yeah, so it would be bad if I asked her for help.

So where does that leave me? Am I just going to give up? No, I can't do that. Emilia and Red are both convinced I can do this. I don't want to disappoint them.

Well... that only leaves me one option then, doesn't it? I need to use Reason and Judgment. I mean, there's really no other choice, right? I know that I decided to limit my uses of it but... things happen, you know? I know it might be affecting me in a negative way but I haven't really noticed any major changes so far, right? Besides everyone is depending on me, I can't just let them down. I can handle Reason and Judgment. I'm only speculating that it has any adverse effects on me anyway.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and the world froze around him. Subaru cast his mind back to his mother's broken sewing machine from years and years ago. As if he had commanded it, an image of the opened machine appeared directly in front of him, the image of the machine clear and picture perfect. Strangely the remainder of the memory looked... fuzzy. Subaru had never seen *Reason and Judgment* display a memory in low resolution before. The sewing machine was crystal clear but the room in Subaru's house and the figures of his much younger parents, were both so low resolution and pixelated that if you didn't know what you were looking at, you could never have guessed.

This seemed strange but Subaru decided it had no real relevance to what he was here to accomplish.

Subaru stared at the strange gear beneath the sewing needle.

Huh. The gear is shaped kind of like a fishing hook so it... Oh! So that's how it works! It actually wraps the other thread around the first one. Quite clever. That should be easy enough to draw for Puck to reproduce. Why did you ever think this was hard?

You need to start using Reason and Judgment more regularly. Why did you even try to stop using it in the first place? To prove a point?

You wasted several hours trying to do something that could have been done in minutes. If it was only you being affected by the inefficiency, then it would be easy to stop using Reason and Judgment. You're certainly not dependent on it. But you have people who do depend on you and you can't let them down by being at less than a hundred percent. There's no choice but to keep using Reason and Judgment. It's the only option. You can always quit using it later if you sense it's starting to affect you.

Subaru restarted time and whistled to himself as he drew the detailed pictures of the remaining gears.

Reinhard and Felt came to find Subaru shortly after that.

"My friend, Felt and I were thinking of returning to the capitol for the day. Felt wishes to check on Master Rom," Reinhard said.

"Sounds like a plan," Subaru agreed. "While you're down there would you mind running a few errands for me?"

"Of course," Reinhard said.

Subaru rattled off a few items and handed Reinhard a bag of gold.

"If you encounter any expenses on the trip, just take them out of the bag. Also while you're in town can you pick up some paper and writing utensils for Felt so she's ready to start doing research on the slum dwellers for us? Oh, and come to think of it," Subaru reached into his pocket and handed Felt a gold coin.

"What's this for?" She asked.

"It's your first week's pay. I know you're not supposed to get paid until the end of the week but there's not much to buy out here and you might see something in town that you want, so consider it an advance," Subaru explained.

"Yeah but I haven't actually done anything for you yet," Felt pointed out.

Subaru shrugged. "Hey, you've been here ready, willing, and able to work. The fact that I'm not ready for you to work yet is my problem not yours. You're still going to get compensated for your time."

Felt mulled that over for a moment. "Well, why don't I just get started today then? I'm not afraid of staying in town, I can take care of myself without Red."

"No," Subaru said flatly before Reinhard could open his mouth.

Felt looked offended, almost mutinous.

"I don't want to tip our hand to our rivals before we're ready," Subaru added in a soothing tone. "If they figure out that we plan to empty the slums before we announce it, they might try to steal our thunder at the selection. Losing a few days won't matter too much in the long run."

"I'd also like you two to do some research on our rivals while you're in town," Subaru continued before Felt could respond. "If we can figure out who the other competitors are, we'll be able to make better strategies."

"That ought to be easy. People are bound to be talking about it," Felt said. "We'll just ask Gramps. He's definitely heard about it from his customers."

Subaru coughed. "Um, one last thing. This is a delicate... personal matter that I need to ask you about and I'd prefer if it stayed between us."

"Of course. You have my word of honor that I won't breath a word of this matter, both as a knight of the realm and as your friend," Reinhard declared.

Felt looked at Reinhard and raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, what he said," Felt sighed, folding her arms.

Subaru sighed. "Emilia and I are getting closer and... there are certain things that we need to be responsible for which... Emilia is unfamiliar with and me being a stranger to this lands... I'm not certain what our options actually are."

"I'm not sure that I follow," Reinhard admitted.

Subaru groped for an easy explanation. "Emilia and I are engaged and... things may happen so... we need to-"

"Avoid becoming parents?" Felt asked brightly.

Subaru sighed. "Essentially. I was trying to find out what the options were for that in Lagunica because neither of us know."

Reinhard's face was the same color as his hair.

Felt laughed. "Don't sweat it, Subaru! Most women in town take a nostrum to avoid unexpected pregnancies. Alchemists mix it up and it's not that expensive. I'll grab Emilia a few months supply."

"Is this nostrum safe for elves or just humans?" Subaru asked.

Felt shrugged. "It can't be too bad. All the demi-human whores I know take it."

"...OK then," Subaru said awkwardly, "Get the gold you need from the bag."

"A three month supply should be only about five silvers anyway," Felt shrugged.

"And while you're talking to Rom, ask him if he would consider doing some jobs for me," Subaru said.

"Like what?" Felt asked.

"I don't know what but let's try to think of something he can do! Honestly, I'd like to just *give* him some gold so he could live a little more comfortably than squatting in the slums but I know he'd balk at that," Subaru replied.

"Yup, that's Gramps," Felt nodded. "Pretty sure I'm going to find a full bag of gold when I go back, even though I told him to start spending it."

"Show him your pay. If he sees you're making good money regularly, he might be more comfortable accepting money from you," Subaru suggested.

"Huh. Good idea," Felt replied.

"Red, is there any risk to you being back in town? If Heikel comes looking for you for instance?" Subaru asked.

Reinhard thought about it. "I don't believe so. Father would face considerable scrutiny from the Sages' council if he took away your and Lady Emilia's only knight after the recent council meeting."

"Good to know, but I was actually worried if he could do anything to make *your* life more difficult," Subaru replied.

Reinhard glanced away. "I doubt that he could make my life more difficult than he has already done."

Subaru waited a moment to see if Reinhard would continue and then nodded. "Alright then. Red, while you're in town remember to keep an eye on Felt. I don't want anyone thinking they can attack her."

Reinhard nodded while Felt folded her arms and scowled in annoyance.

"Felt, make sure you keep an eye on Red. I don't want Heikel or anyone else misleading him or trying to trick him into a trap," Subaru finished.

Felt rolled her eyes at Subaru. "Was that supposed to be a joke?"

"No, it wasn't a joke, you bonehead!" Subaru snorted. "Felt, do you really think I'm trying to recruit you onto my team as an act of charity? You're one of the brightest people I've met on this planet and that is supremely valuable. Red is an invincible warrior and you are a master strategist and planner, or you will be once you finish developing your talents. You two form a perfect team and I want you to start thinking of yourselves that way."

Felt looked shocked then her expression turned thoughtful.

"But before you guys take off, there is one thing I'd like you to help me with," Subaru said.

Subaru, Rem, and Reinhard carried the sewing machine desk toward Petra's house.

Felt had gone ahead to explain the situation to Petra and her Mom.

When Rem and Reinhard carried the awkward desk through the narrow door, Subaru let go and gave up. He knew he wasn't helping much anyway but his ego required that he at least *act* like he was contributing.

As Subaru walked into the cottage after Rem and Reinhard set the machine down, he noticed that Petra seemed to be less uncomfortable around him. He assumed that the strange machine was occupying most of her attention.

"Hello, Mrs. Leyte," Subaru greeted her.

"My lord, what is... that?" She asked.

"That is an invention I have recently created. I think that it will make the lives of seamstresses across the kingdom less difficult while also increasing their productivity," He explained. "I was hoping that you'd be willing to test it for me."

The seamstress seemed uncertain. "I would be happy to help you, Lord Subaru, but I'm not sure what you want me to do."

"Petra, could you hand me that cloth scrap please?" Subaru said, pulling a chair up to the desk.

Petra gave him the scrap and he used the sewing machines to quickly lay down a line of fine stitches along a scrap as long as his arm. He then cut the thread and handed the scrap to Petra.

Mrs. Leyte stared at the scrap in shock. "Putting down this many stitches would have taken me half an hour! And they're so small!"

"I thought it could save you some work. Do you think you'd be willing to use it for a few weeks and give me your feedback?" Subaru said, standing up.

Subaru had spent close to an hour giving Petra and Mrs. Leyte lessons on using the machine. Petra in particular seemed to be very excited about her new toy.

Reinhard, Subaru, Felt, and Rem were walking back to the carriage.

"Well, I feel like I accomplished something today," Subaru said.

"Do you really think you can make enough of those to change the sewing industry?" Felt asked. "I feel like that's the second most common job in the kingdom, right after farming."

"It's just a prototype," Subaru shrugged. "We need to see if those two can actually make use of it. We also need to start thinking about the cost to reproduce it without Puck doing all the work with magic."

"Well, we should take you and Miss Rem back to the manor before we head to the capitol," Reinhard suggested.

Subaru squinted at the sun. "Rem, do you mind walking home?"

Rem shook her head silently.

"It's already almost lunch time and the capitol is not a short trip," Subaru said. "Why don't you guys just go, we can walk back."

"Are you sure?" Reinhard asked.

"I'm sure we'll manage," Subaru shrugged. "Make sure you look after each other!" He called as Reinhard and Felt climbed into the carriage.

"Got it!" Felt called back as the carriage rolled away.

Subaru and Rem walked in silence. Subaru was waiting for Rem to talk but it seemed that wasn't going to happen.

"So, Rem, I feel like we really haven't talked much lately," Subaru drawled.

Rem didn't answer. She kept walking with her head down.

Subaru coughed. "So... is this 'I don't feel like talking to you, Subaru' quiet or 'I'm still convinced you're a Witch Cultist, Subaru' quiet?"

Rem stopped in her tracks, her head bowed.

Subaru waited a long moment.

"I know that you're not a Witch Cultist, Lord Subaru." She whispered.

"Hey, that's great! Oh and you can skip the 'lord' part. I'm not really into that," Subaru replied.

Rem stood still breathing heavily.

"Rem, are you alright?" Subaru asked uncertainly.

"I'm sorry!" She shouted, tears streaming down her face. "I'm sorry that I tried to kill you!"

Rem stood there and started to cry, loud wracking sobs as she buried her face in her hands.

Subaru's jaw dropped. Shit. *I did not see this coming.*

Subaru walked over to Rem and gently put his arms around her.

Rem's head snapped up her eyes wild.

Subaru gently stroked her back.

After a moment, Rem's sobs quieted a bit and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"It's OK, Rem. You made a mistake but nobody got hurt. Mistakes are only as important as the consequences they cause. No harm's been done. It's *fine*," He soothed.

"I was certain that you were a cultist," Rem whimpered. "I was sure that you were there to kill my sister and I."

"Sometimes it's hard to tell who people are at first glance. It's usually worth a second look," Subaru replied.

"I was so... so sure that you were a monster," Rem murmured.

"Well, you did watch me kill a whole lot of people, plus a giant troll. Honestly, I *felt* like a monster after that," Subaru half joked.

Rem took a deep breath. "Why? They were going to kill everyone. They were the monsters."

"Maybe but... there's always a chance for people to be better. Right up until the moment when you kill them anyway. Then there's no chance," Subaru replied. "They were terrible people, or at least they were people willing to follow terrible, evil orders but they were people none the less. Until they met me. Then they were nothing but blood and rotting meat."

Subaru felt a drop of rain and looked up realizing the rain was starting to fall.

"We should get back," Subaru murmured, patting Rem's shoulder as they resumed their walk.

Ram was waiting for them on the front porch when Rem and Subaru returned. The rain had stopped without ever really progressing beyond a light drizzle and the sun was coming out.

"Where were you, Lord Subaru?" Ram asked in a tight voice.

That's actually not your question, Ram. You're asking: 'Where was Rem and why do I now find that Rem was with you?'

"Rem was kind enough to help me, Reinhard and Felt make a delivery to Arlem," Subaru replied.

Rem moved next to her sister and bowed her head.

"And where are Sir Reinhard and Miss Felt?" Ram asked.

"They went back to town," Subaru said.

Ram's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you should seek out Lady Emilia. I think she would enjoy your company."

Oh, is that what this is about? Rem tried to kill me just last week and you're already thinking that I'm going to try to seduce her? Jeez, what is courtship like where you're from Ram? I bet it's both really exciting and not at all conducive to good health.

"That's a good idea. I think I'll do that. Nice talking to you, Rem," Subaru said, walking inside.

"Thank you... Subaru," Rem whispered.

Subaru didn't need to turn around to feel Ram glaring lines of fire into his back.

"Hi, Subaru," Emilia said as Subaru walked into the library. Emilia was sitting at a desk in front of a large pile of books. Puck was dozing on the desk, looking almost like an ordinary cat.

"Hey, Mili," Subaru said, walking over to Emilia and gently running a hand through her hair. "Learn anything interesting?"

Subaru glanced at the book that Emilia was reading. He wasn't a proficient reader yet but it appeared to be describing some kind of race war between humans and demi-humans.

"I'm learning a lot but I'm not feeling that I understand much yet," Emilia complained.

"I so know how you feel," Subaru commiserated, taking a seat on the arm of her chair.

"What have you been doing today?" Emilia asked.

"I finished the sewing machine and then Reinhard, Felt, Rem, and I dropped it off at Petra's house for testing. Petra was very excited," Subaru smiled.

"I bet," Emilia replied, "Where are Felt and Reinhard?"

"Oh, they went back to the capitol to grab a few things after we dropped the machine off," Subaru replied. "Rem and I walked back."

"I assume she didn't try to kill you?" Emilia asked, turning a page in her book with exaggerated indifference.

"Could you at least *pretend* to act concerned?" Subaru snorted.

Emilia laughed.

"No, she didn't try to kill me," Subaru continued. "As a matter of fact, she cried about it and apologized."

"Oh, that's wonderful! I'm glad you two worked things out," Emilia smiled.

"Me too. Although, since Ram saw me walking back to the manor with Rem, I think she's come to the mistaken conclusion that I'm trying to seduce her sister. It's still good to put that little misunderstanding between me and Rem behind us. Always assuming that the *new* misunderstanding with Ram doesn't get me killed," Subaru replied.

"You know, Subaru," Puck said, waking up and stretching. "Most people wouldn't refer to attempted murder as a misunderstanding."

"I don't know, Puck," Subaru mused. "I've been here for about 8 days and I've already had at least four incidents of people trying to kill me. Honestly, I think I'm starting to become kind of blasé about the whole thing."

"At least?" Puck asked.

Subaru shrugged, "I'm not really sure how many times you contemplated my death. Please don't tell me either. Also I expect the number of attempts on my life to rise drastically now that Ram thinks I'm after her little sister."

Puck laughed but Emilia looked annoyed at them both.

"Hey, Puck," Subaru said. "I'm glad you're here. I needed to ask your advice about something."

"Yes, Subaru. You *should* go chase after Rem and leave my daughter alone," Puck said, floating up into the air with a yawn.

Emilia frowned and tapped Puck's forehead with her pinkie finger.

"Ow," Puck said wholly unconvincingly.

"Do *not* take that as permission!" Emilia said, pointing at Subaru sternly.

"Yes, Mili," Subaru said, trying not to laugh. "Actually, Puck, I wanted to talk to you about Beatrice. What do you know about her... job?"

"Betty's contract? Umm... well, not much, I guess. I don't remember too much from the old days. Betty remembers them better than I do," Puck replied. "Why do you ask?"

Subaru pondered his answer for a moment. "Because... she's lonely. She's miserable and she's despairing of ever changing her life so... I want to find a way to help her."

"Betty's sad?" Puck asked in surprise. "When did that happen? She always seems so happy."

"Sure, when you're around," Subaru snickered. Then he got serious. "Do you know anything about 'that person?'"

"Which person?" Puck asked.

Subaru grimaced. "I don't know. '*That* person!' The one that Beatrice has been waiting for."

"I'm sorry, Subaru. I just don't know. What are you trying to do anyway?" Puck asked.

"Whoever 'that person' is, Beatrice has been waiting for them for four hundred years and that royally pisses me off. I want to find them, give them a piece of my mind for neglecting that poor girl for so long, and then drag them back to Beako all tied up with a bow," Subaru said firmly.

It was hard to read a cat's facial expressions but Subaru thought that Puck might actually look impressed.

"This is why I love him, Puck," Emilia said with a fond smile.

Subaru stared at Emilia.

"What?" Emilia asked.

Subaru started to smile. "Did you just say you loved me?"

Emilia turned red, "No!"

"You did," Subaru whispered, wrapping his arms around Emilia.

"No!" Emilia said, burying her face in her hands.

"You said you loved me!" Subaru cheered, laying his cheek against the top of her head.

"I did not!" Emilia said, her voice muffled from behind her hands.

"I didn't hear anything," Puck grumbled.

"We need to celebrate," Subaru proclaimed as Emilia shook her head back and forth. "It's just past lunch time. What do you say to a picnic?"

"A... what?" Emilia asked, uncovering her face.

"A picnic, you know where you take some food, go out someplace, and eat it together."

"Sounds interesting," Emilia said in a tone that made clear she didn't understand why that would be interesting.

Rem had obligingly packed them a basket with some food and wine. Puck had disappeared off to talk to Beatrice and assuage the concerns that Subaru had raised in him about his sister. Subaru and Emilia were sitting under a shady tree in a flower filled meadow just outside the manor.

"This *is* rather nice," Emilia said, nibbling on a sandwich.

"So tell me, Mili, what did you do in the forest?" Subaru asked.

"I spent most of my time tending to the frozen bodies," Emilia replied.

Subaru paused. "Gruesome," He said. "What did you do for fun?"

Emilia thought about it for a bit. "I spent a few years making a map of the forest," She said.

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Damn, Emilia, we really need to introduce you to a few games."

Emilia cocked her head. "Why what did you do where you come from?"

Subaru flushed. "Um. Nothing very interesting actually."

Emilia crossed her arms. "Subaru! That's not fair! I told you what I used to do!"

Subaru made a pained expression. "Well, I spent most of my time in my room."

"Oh. You weren't allowed to leave it?" Emilia asked sympathetically.

"No, I was... I was actually *supposed* to leave it... I... just didn't," Subaru sighed.

"I don't understand," Emilia said.

"Let's... just not talk about it?"

Emilia reached out and took his hand. "Subaru, you can tell me anything."

"Um. Really it's not worth getting into."

"I can tell that it's bothering you. Let me help," Emilia urged.

"Look, Mili, I just don't want to get into it. Let's just change the subject, OK? This really isn't any of your business."

Emilia looked shocked then offended. "Why not?"

"It's... it's really... complicated!" Subaru said helplessly.

"So explain it to me!"

"Mili," Subaru covered his eyes. "I..."

"Did you do something bad?" She asked gently.

"No, I didn't do anything bad," Subaru shook his head.

"Then why won't you tell me?" Emilia asked, raising her voice. "Do you not trust me?"

"Of course, I do!" Subaru said, genuinely offended by the accusation.

"Do you think I'm too dumb to understand it?"

"No!"

"Then why won't you tell me? I told you all about what I did in the forest!" Emilia shouted.

"It's... it's different!" Subaru struggled.

Emilia stood up, her eyes were filled with unshed tears. "I admitted that I loved you this morning," She said in a cold voice. "I knew that saying that was a bad idea. I knew you could never feel the same way about me that I felt about you."

Emilia started to walk away.

Subaru gaped at her and made a dive from a sitting position. He managed to grab her wrist.

"Let go of me, Subaru," Emilia said, not turning around.

"Emilia, this isn't even fair! You *know* that I love you!" Subaru shouted, getting to his feet.

Emilia whirled around, her eyes blazing. "Fair?! I told you about the most personal thing in my life yesterday! Now not only will you not tell me *anything* about your old life but you won't even tell me why! You love me?! You don't even trust me!"

She wrenched her arm free of Subaru, stomping away.

Subaru hesitated a moment and then raced after her.

"Emilia!" He shouted.

"Get away from me, Subaru," He saw the tears on her face but her voice was like ice as she kept walking away.

He took a deep breath. "I thought you had questions."

Emilia paused her stride. "Are you ready to answer them?"

Subaru breathed heavily for a long moment. "You won't like the answers."

Emilia finally turned around to look at him. She crossed her arms. "Why don't you let me decide that?"

Subaru swallowed hard. "What if... you don't like me after I tell you? I don't want to talk about this."

Emilia rolled her eyes heavenward and stamped her foot. "Subaru! You are such a selfish child!" She screamed.

"Me?! I have done nothing since I've gotten here but try to help you!" He yelled back.

Emilia's face went still. "Are you just trying to help me or do you love me?"

"I love you," Subaru said seriously.

She nodded. "I love you too," She said almost in a tone of wonder.

She closed her eyes and spoke in a calm voice, "Subaru, did you ever wonder how scary it was yesterday for me to talk to you about what happened in the Elier forest?"

Subaru frowned. "I know it was hard for you to talk about it but why was it scary?"

Emilia shook her head and sighed. "Because of the very real possibility that you would be angry at me. Because you might have been disgusted with me or even hated me. There was a chance you never would have looked at me the same way again, Subaru. *That* is why it was so scary!"

Subaru shook his head. "Emilia, you *know* I would never do that. I'm on your side; always. I know that you're not perfect and you're not an angel. You make mistakes and sometimes, whatever the problem you're trying to fix, you are going to come up short against it. But I will always believe that whatever the outcome, you did your best. You can talk to me about anything. I will never turn against you."

Emilia closed her eyes and ground her teeth. "Subaru, you are so stupid!"

Subaru threw up his hands. "What am I doing wrong here, Mili? Talk to me! Give me a clue!"

"You don't trust me!" She accused.

"Of course I do!"

"No, you don't!" She yelled back, stamping her foot. "You just gave me a whole speech about how much I should trust you! You told me how I should trust you because you love me and you'll never turn against me. You told me how you want me to tell you anything, no matter how bad it is! So then why don't you trust me enough to tell me something bad? You are demanding that I trust you implicitly but you won't trust me that way! It's not fair!"

Subaru blinked.

"You tell me that you love me! How am I supposed to believe that?" Emilia asked in tears. "How can you love someone you won't trust? What does the word 'love' even mean to you if you don't think trust is essential? What do *I* mean to you?"

Subaru was silent.

He swallowed hard as he felt tears running down his face. He took a step closer. "Emilia," He whispered.

She was struggling to breath through her sobs. "Don't touch me," She murmured with no force as Subaru pulled her into his arms.

She was stiff in his arms but then she relaxed and they were crying and sobbing together.

They stayed like that for a few minutes and then they both became quiet.

"Emilia," Subaru whispered. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apologies," Emilia whispered, her voice muffled against his chest.

"Emilia... I didn't want you to know that... back home... I was the biggest goddamn loser on the planet," Subaru murmured.

Emilia was quiet for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"I was a loser. Nobody expected anything from me. I almost never left my room for years because no one really cared if I did. I didn't leave my room because I was scared of the world outside. I stopped going to school. I never tried to find work. I gave up on the world and then the world gave up on me. Even my parents weren't sure if I..." He pause, "I had no friends. I never did anything that mattered. Except for my parents, nobody will even notice that I'm gone. I was pathetic. I was a worthless loser who should never have been born. That's what I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want you... to see me that way," Subaru sighed.

Emilia took a few deep breaths against his chest. "I don't know that Subaru. I've never met him," She murmured. "He's certainly not *my* Subaru. My Subaru is brave and clever and hardworking. He is absolutely not a loser. He rescued me over and over again. He risked his life to save mine. He rescued a whole village of people-"

"Using invincibility magic," Subaru interrupted deprecatingly.

"While thinking that he was going to die!" Emilia continued firmly. "I held him in my arms that night. I know how scared he was. How small and helpless he must have felt. But he did it anyway. He risked his life to save theirs. That's what the entire village of Arlem sees when they look at my Subaru. And that's what I see too."

Subaru gave a little choke.

Emilia raised her head and looked fiercely at Subaru. "I don't know what your world was like. I don't really understand the situation you described. But I believe with all my heart that you did the best you were capable of *at that time*," She emphasized. "You're not the man that you described to me and I will never see you as any less than the man I see now."

"I am on your side, Subaru; always," Emilia said defiantly. "I know that you're not perfect and that you're not an angel. You do make mistakes and sometimes, whatever the problem you're trying to solve, you are going to come up short against it. But I will always believe that whatever the outcome, you did your best. You can talk to me about anything. I will never abandon you."

Subaru's eyes filled with tears as he gazed into Emilia's. "I know that," Subaru said with a catch in his voice. "I believe that. Because I trust you... because I understand that if I want you to trust me... I need to prove that I trust you just as much. And I always want you to trust me."

Emilia's eyes were still watery as she nodded. "Good. So at least all this accomplished something," She said briskly with a small catch in her voice as she hugged him tight.

They both started crying again.

Neither of them noticed that in the woods nearby, a small girl dressed in pink with drill shaped braids watched them closely.

The next morning, Subaru woke up and left his bedroom for breakfast. As soon as he emerged into the hall he found Beatrice standing there arms folded waiting for him.

"It's about time you woke up, I suppose. You kept Betty waiting," She said.

I did?

"Sorry about that. What were you waiting for me for?" Subaru asked.

"Betty has come to a very important decision, in fact. A decision which involves you," Beatrice said, marching into the room next to Subaru's.

Subaru followed her inside, realizing that Beatrice had moved her library next to Subaru's room.

"OK, what was your decision?" Subaru asked.

Beatrice looked up at Subaru with folded arms and firm resolve. "Betty wants Subaru to be the one to kill her, in fact."

***Chapter 5*: Chapter 5**

Subaru felt as if he had just narrowly avoided a car crash.

"...What did you just say?" Subaru asked.

"Betty has chosen Subaru to kill her, in fact," Beatrice explained, holding out a small dagger that blazed with some kind of magical energy.

Oh fuck. What the hell do I say to this? If I say the wrong thing she might just go and do it herself. No, no fucking around this time. I need Reason and Judgment.

Subaru froze time with *Reason and Judgment* and he felt his horror and fear slip away.

First impressions: Beatrice's eyes are watery. Her fingers are trembling. She acts calm and composed; like she has carefully thought this through but it's a lie. This is an emotional response. Beatrice is terrified of something. Something new that has turned her life upside down. It may be arrogant to say but the only new thing that Beatrice has been exposed to lately was you, Subaru thought to himself. It has to be something you said. You gave her some insight or some idea which she has decided that she believes to be true, and whatever that idea is, it is so terrifying that Beatrice has decided she would rather die than confront it.

Alright, what is the solution for that? The cure for fear is knowledge and that's tricky when it's an idea that you're afraid of. You should keep her talking. Drag this out. The only way to talk Beatrice out of her suicidal impulses is to understand what made her have them in the first place.

Subaru restarted time. "Wow," He said in a humble voice. "I'm... honored. You've met so many amazing people over the course of your long life and you chose me to kill you? I'm... I'm really very flattered, Beatrice."

"Yes, yes, you are, I suppose," Beatrice said, waving a tiny hand dismissively. "Now can we get on with it?"

"Well, hold on, Beatrice. You've been waiting for this moment for a long time. I want to make sure I get it just right for you. You deserve that," Subaru replied. "Damn, after all these years someone with as big a gift as you for patience and planning must have so many ideas about how you want this to be done. Which one did you settle on? You're your mother's legacy so it's very important that no one gets the wrong idea about your motivations. I want to make sure that everyone in the whole world knows how such an important act in world history was carried out."

Beatrice blinked and glanced away seeming to ponder this.

That's it, Beatrice. Think about people talking about you after your death. Imagine those people deciding that the final moments of a four hundred year old Great Spirit were lame and underwhelming. Imagine them saying that Beatrice died due to weakness and fear.

Pride is always the perfect manipulator.

"So I guess this means that we're not going to go out and find 'that person?'" Subaru asked, sitting down on the futon.

Beatrice shot him an annoyed look. "We would never have found them, in fact."

"Oh, really? Because I'm pretty good at finding stuff. Why do you think that we'll never find them?" Subaru replied.

"That person' does not exist for Betty," Beatrice snarled but her eyes were filled with tears. "If they existed they would have found Beatrice by now!"

OK, can't really argue with that logic but the question is: why? What has changed? What does Beatrice see today that she didn't see before that makes her believe this?

"Well, like I said, maybe you need to go look for them? Maybe there's a reason they can't come to the library? Maybe 'that person' needs Betty the same way that Betty needs 'that person?'" Subaru replied.

"Betty belongs in her library!" The Great Spirit thundered, stomping her foot. "Betty has waited here in accordance with her mother's wishes for four hundred years! Why should she leave it now?"

Beatrice stood there, gasping for breath.

"You just answered your own question," Subaru said quietly. "You've been waiting in this library for four hundred years. You're right. If 'that person' was going to come find you, they would have done so by now. But that doesn't mean that 'that person' doesn't exist, it just means that waiting here for them isn't accomplishing much. You should leave the library because *staying* in it just isn't working."

Beatrice shook her fist at Subaru. "And I suppose that Subaru thinks he could be 'that person,' in fact? He thinks that Subaru could banish Betty's loneliness? But Subaru has already given his heart to the elf!"

Subaru's eyes widened.

Is that what this is about? Subaru's fear of saying the wrong thing in this precarious moment rose up like smoke threatening to choke him.

Subaru stopped time. *Reason and Judgment* banished his fear, it drifted away like smoke on the breeze leaving him cool and detached.

So that's the answer. Beatrice actually wants you to be 'that person' but she's afraid of the competition from Emilia.

Come to think about it, Subaru continued, *Beatrice has tried to ask you a question several times. Ever since you told her... that maybe her mother wanted her to select 'that person!' She kept trying to ask you something but each time she did Emilia showed up and Beatrice got annoyed and refused to talk.*

OK, now that the problem is understood, what is the solution? Is Beatrice saying that you either have to give up Emilia or watch Beatrice die? Seems like a text book entry on abusive relationships. This is ridiculous. There is no justifiable reason why you should have to choose between them. And by what right does Beatrice even ask you to do so? You can be a better husband to Emilia and a better 'partner' to Beatrice, or whatever the term is for a spirit's contractor, than anyone else in the world. Why would either of them object to sharing you; given the understanding that one else imaginable could meet both of their needs as well as you can? Regardless, first you need to attack the preconception that you must choose either her or Emilia. But in order to do that, you need to establish that you are in fact 'that person.'

Subaru was about to leave the frozen moment when out of the depths of Subaru's mind, a soft, quiet voice came as if speaking over a long distance.

I don't know about this. Previously I refused to tell her that I was 'that person.' Telling her that I am 'that person' is a lie. *I'd be lying to Beatrice in order to save her life but... it still feels wrong.*

You can't let emotions get in the way, another part of Subaru thought. *This is a crisis. Beatrice is prepared to kill herself and a poorly chosen word will result in her doing just that. You need to think strategically. It's a lie for a good cause after all. No one else could even conceivably be a better partner to Beatrice than you. Tell her that you are 'that person.'* You can certainly convince her. *You've been laying the groundwork for making this revelation without even realizing it. Emotions like guilt are irrelevant in situations like this. They'll just lead you down unwise paths.*

No, I disagree, Subaru argued back, *Beako is hurting. Her emotions are extremely relevant. Ignoring her emotions is ignoring who she is. I can't tell Beako that I'm 'that person,' she needs to tell me that I'm 'that person!'*

You're being irrational. Beatrice told you that many people before you have come to Beatrice and told her they could become 'that person.' If that was all she needed to hear, she would have accepted one of them. *Beatrice needs guidance and stability: two things that you can offer to her better than anyone else in the entire world. Even if your statement that you are 'that person' isn't true at the time you make it, it will become true over time: once she believes that you are this mythical 'that person' then you have become 'that person.'*

I don't kno... Wait a second! Why is this happening now?! Beako did tell me that lots of people came here trying to save her, trying to comfort her, and asking to be that person. She never had a breakdown like this before or she would have killed herself: Beako isn't just playing around, she is serious about this. So what's the difference? What did I say that none of the others thought of? That's the key! Once I understand why Beako is reacting to me differently, I'll know how

to save her!

Fair enough, but where does that leave you? How can you figure out which one of a thousand different things you might have said or done to Beatrice that the others didn't?

...I have absolutely no idea. I guess I'll just to wing it.

Are you really willing to bet Beatrice's life on your abilities to 'wing it'? Tell her that you are 'that person' and she'll believe you. It's actually what she wants to hear.

You're right, but it's not what she needs to hear.

Subaru restarted time. He pinched the bridge of his nose as his head throbbed.

Weird. I don't think I've ever argued with myself like that before. Does it have something to do with Reason and Judgment? Or is it that I've never been in a situation where I need to talk someone out of killing themselves and the stress is overwhelming? Never mind. Can't think about that right now.

"Oh, I see," Subaru murmured. "You're not upset because I think that I'm 'that person.' You're upset because you think that I'm 'that person.'"

Beatrice's eyes widened and she began flailing her arms. "That is ridiculous, in fact! Someone like you could never be Betty's person!"

"Of course I can!" Subaru snorted. "And you're clever enough to figure out why!" He knelt down in front of Beatrice, "You've been listening to my plans and goals. You know what I'm doing here. I'm here to fix the world. Just like your mother wanted to."

Beatrice blinked and grew still.

"Fixing the world is a big job," Subaru mused. "It's going to take serious time and effort but I wonder if you ever realized that Betty is part of the world. I mean, you've tried to stay out of it for the past few centuries by hiding in the library but Betty is an important part of the world. I can't fix the world if Betty stays broken."

Beatrice's face was torn. Subaru knew that the same look had been on his own face too often back home: fearing to hope but desperately wanting to.

"Subaru loves Emilia, I suppose," Beatrice mumbled.

"And Emilia loves Subaru. And Puck," Subaru added. "And Puck loves Emilia and Betty. So why can't Subaru love Betty and Emilia? If Puck can do it, why can't I?"

Subaru held his breath as he saw Beatrice's lip tremble as did the tip of the knife she held.

It was like Subaru could read Beatrice's thoughts, as if she had said out loud to him: "Please help me! I can't endure this hopeless existence any longer. Today is the end, one way or the other. Today I'll either embrace you or this dagger."

Beatrice took a ragged breath. "Tell Betty that you're Betty's person, in fact," She whispered.

Subaru shook his head. "No. Everyone else said that and it never made you happy."

Beatrice looked at him in confusion.

Subaru put a hand over his heart. "Tell Subaru that he is Betty's person, in fact," He replied. "Tell Subaru that Betty wants Subaru to be hers. That Betty wants Subaru to make her happy."

Beatrice violently trembled. "You're not being fair, I suppose!" Beatrice exclaimed. "You think that Subaru can wash away four hundred years of solitude just by holding Betty's hand! Betty is tired. She wants to die! She wants Subaru to free her from this pain!"

Subaru hesitated and then he slowly nodded. "Very well then. If that is what you truly want, then we shall make a contract," He said, holding up his hand.

"A contract?"

"For one year," Subaru explained. "You will be my precious one. Subaru's very own sweet little Betty. I will *make* Beatrice happy," He said with such conviction that Beatrice's mouth parted in wonder. "And one year from today, if Betty feels that I have not made her happy enough, I will release her from her pain. That is my contract."

Beatrice just stared at Subaru.

"I can't take away the pain of four hundred years, Betty. But I can make Betty decide that they were worth it. I can set Betty free of her bonds if Betty will bind me in hers," Subaru said. "Because the truth is, even if he didn't know it, the person Betty picks needs Betty just as much as Betty needs that person."

Beatrice was breathing hard as she slowly lifted her hand and placed it against Subaru's palm.

"I, Beatrice the Great Spirit, hereby form a contract with Subaru Natsuki. In one year he will kill me," Beatrice intoned.

"In one year I will kill you if you ask me to kill you," Subaru corrected her.

Beatrice hesitated then nodded. "Under the terms of this contract, Subaru may not form contracts with any other spirits."

"And under the terms of this contract, Betty must always tell Subaru if she is feeling sad or lonely," Subaru added.

"Beatrice must use her magic to protect and support Subaru," Beatrice continued.

"And Subaru must play games with Beatrice and read her stories and always make her feel loved," Subaru finished.

"The pact is sealed," Beatrice whispered, her lip trembling.

Subaru wrapped his arms around Beatrice and drew her into a tight hug. "Thank you so much for choosing me, Betty," He whispered. "I always wanted to have an adorable little sister to love and cherish, just like you."

Beatrice buried her face in Subaru's chest, weeping as Subaru rubbed her back. "It's OK, Beatrice. I promise you, you'll never be alone again."

"But you're mortal, I suppose," She whispered. "What happens when you die?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure that eventually Emilia and I will start talking about starting a family," Subaru whispered soothingly. "I'm going to take care of you for the rest of my life, and then you'll be my children's after that, and their children's after that, forever and ever, until Betty forgets what being alone even means."

Beatrice sobbed and Subaru held her tight.

This touching moment might have continued for some time except Subaru and Beatrice heard a sneeze.

They looked up to find Emilia hiding just outside the door, rubbing her nose. Puck floated next to her.

Subaru and Beatrice shared a look of embarrassed resignation.

"Emilia, exactly how long have you been standing there?" Subaru sighed.

"Well... for most of it actually. Puck and I came to investigate when we heard Beatrice yelling at you," Emilia said apologetically.

"Can I assume that also includes me tipping my hand about wanting to start a family?" Subaru moaned.

Emilia turned bright red and looked away. "I didn't... hear that part very well," She muttered.

"Perfect," Subaru sighed, shaking his head. "But on a happier note: Emilia! Look at my adorable new little sister!" Subaru yelled, swinging Beatrice into the air and catching her in his arms. He laughed as he twirled her around the library.

Subaru brought Beatrice over to Emilia and Puck, cradling her in the crook of his arm. After a moment, Beatrice leaned over and laid her head on Subaru's shoulder and closed her eyes.

"So now you're a spirits arts user too!" Emilia congratulated him.

"Oh, who cares about that? I'm a big brother! That's way more awesome!" Subaru cheered. "And now I have someone special to spend time with when you and Puck are doing your own spirit arts thingies."

Beatrice actually began to smile as she lay against Subaru's shoulder.

Puck sighed. "Subaru, we really need to have a long talk about your relationships with the women in my family," He grumbled.

That evening, Reinhard and Felt returned to the manor with fresh missives from Roswaal for Ram.

"Ram, what is Roswaal even doing in the capitol right now, anyway?" Subaru asked.

"That is none of your business," Ram replied, walking away.

"Silly me," Subaru sighed as the entire group except for Ram and Rem took seats in the sitting room. Subaru sat with Beatrice on one side and Emilia on the other. Beatrice had proved somewhat reluctant to let go of his arm and Subaru had ultimately just wrapped his arm around her and let her burrow her head into his chest.

Subaru had wondered if his new relationship with Beatrice would cause problems for Emilia but so far she seemed to regard everything Beatrice did as adorable and appeared to approve of Subaru assuming a big brotherly role to her.

"So just to get the easy stuff out of the way first, is Rom OK?" Subaru asked.

"Yeah, Gramps is fine. He said he'd consider doing some jobs for you, provided you're not just trying to give him charity," Felt said with a smile.

"Called it," Subaru muttered. "Did you learn anything in town?"

"I discovered that Miss Felt is a genius," Reinhard said seriously.

Felt actually blushed and looked away for a moment.

"Hm. I bet there's an interesting little story here," Subaru said.

"Lady Crusch Karnstein was the first royal candidate discovered and the likely favorite among the nobility," Reinhard explained. "She approached me in town and attempted to recruit me for a large project of some sort."

Subaru frowned. "Um, this may be a dumb question, but wouldn't she know that you're already working with me?"

"Yeah but she expects you to drop out quickly," Felt said.

Subaru glanced at Emilia. "Does she know something that we don't?"

"Just the opposite, in fact," Felt smirked. "Crusch apparently heard about how the Bowel Hunter nearly killed you."

"Not my finest moment," Subaru admitted.

"Anyway, she also heard the stories about you killing a giant troll with your bare hands. The whole town was talking about it. She put the two together and decided that you spread this rumor as a political ploy to drum up interest in your campaign. She called it the desperate move of a political neophyte," Felt smiled.

"Wise fool," Subaru commented. "She's right about me being a rookie but for all the wrong reasons."

"Miss Felt was *amazing* in this encounter," Reinhard enthused. "I warned her that Lady Crusch has a Divine Blessing that will warn her whenever someone lies in her presence. I suggested she be scrupulously honest in her conversation. Instead, Miss Felt took advantage of Lady Crusch's over-reliance on her Blessing to mislead her and feed her half truths."

"Oh really?" Subaru smiled.

Felt was blushing under Reinhard's praise. "It was no big deal. Everyone thinks that all the folks in Lowtown are idiots. I've used that to my advantage many times. There's nobody easier to scam than someone who thinks that they're smarter than you. Crusch assumed I was too simple to make up a coherent lie anyway."

"But how did you deceive someone who can always tell if you're lying?" Emilia asked.

"Easy," Felt shrugged, looking exceptionally pleased with herself. "In situations like this, no one expects you to *tell* them the important information, they expect to have to dig it out. Like when Crusch said that she knew you were going to withdraw from the selection soon, I looked at Reinhard and asked him: 'Do you think she has an informant in the camp?'"

"Implying that we had discussed my withdrawal and confirming her suspicions without saying any falsehoods," Subaru nodded. "Felt, you are a genius!"

"So I've said many times," Reinhard agreed.

"Quiet, you," Felt lightly swatted at his chest but she was still beaming.

"So what did you manage to learn about Crusch?" Subaru asked.

"She has some kind of big plan that she wants Red's help with. She claims that his grandfather is involved," Felt said.

Subaru looked at Reinhard.

Reinhard flushed. "My grandfather and I are not... on the best of terms. I have no idea what he might be doing right now."

"OK, no worries," Subaru reassured him. He scratched his chin and thought it over. "Well, if she wants Red then it stands to reason that whatever she's doing is dangerous and violent. Nothing personal buddy, I know you have more talents than that."

Reinhard shrugged.

"She also said that she plans to end the pact with the dragon when she gets elected," Felt added.

Subaru's eyes widened.

He shared a worried look with Emilia.

"It sounds like Crusch is our primary concern for a variety of reasons. If she takes the throne we won't get what Emilia needs. That means we can't bargain with her. We'll need to neutralize her," Subaru said.

"Um, how are we going to do that, exactly?" Felt asked.

"No clue," Subaru admitted. "It was a problem statement, not a solution."

"Gramps says the next candidate is an arrogant noblewoman named Priscilla Barielle," Felt said. "She's supposed to be

outrageously beautiful but she's also some kind of black widow: her wealthy husbands keep dying."

"Doesn't sound that worrisome for us," Subaru replied.

Reinhard shook his head. "I've heard of Lady Priscilla. She has a strange magic that grants her incredible luck. Situations miraculously turn out well for her against all odds. The nobility doesn't like her very much due to her arrogance but she is extraordinarily popular among the people of her own domain."

Subaru drummed his fingers on his leg. "OK, so that is a *little* worrisome. Then again luck can only take you so far. If we stack the odds against her high enough her luck will run out. From the way you describe her, she sounds like someone you have to wait in line to dislike. I remember there was a saying from a place near my homeland: 'If your opponent is of choleric temperament, seek to irritate them.'"

"That *sounds* wise at least," Felt replied. "What the hell does it mean?"

Subaru snickered at her. "If your foe has a bad temper, make them lose it."

"OK, now *that's* a plan!" Felt said.

"The final candidate is Anastasia Hoshin. She's an extremely successful business woman who rose out of poverty to establish the dominant trading company on the continent," Reinhard said. "She's a famously shrewd and resourceful negotiator."

Subaru looked at the ceiling for a moment. "Anastasia is probably the least dangerous to us at the moment. She's a business woman. If the selection starts to look more like a loss than a gain for her, I bet she'll either back out or solicit offers from rivals to form alliances. If she starts to win, she'll make us an offer to drop out.

"For the other two, we need more information," Subaru continued. "I bet we can provoke Priscilla into doing something stupid, I doubt she has much tolerance for frustration, but to get a grip on Crusch we're going to need to figure out what she's planning so we can counter it."

Subaru thought for a moment. "Emilia, did any of your reading in the library turn up what the opening ceremony will be like?"

"Assuming it's like the selections for lesser titles, we'll all be presented to the Sages' council and be permitted to make a short statement. Then we all eat and stand around talking about the weather apparently," Emilia replied.

Subaru laughed. "Interesting interpretation of politics. OK, so at least it will be short and sweet. Emilia, you and I need to really practice our speeches."

"Practice them? What do you mean?" She asked.

"Well, for one thing we want to be the best presentation there if we can possibly help it. If someone else is better than us at the presentation we look bad. If everyone has spent tons of time polishing their speeches and platforms, then we want to be in the same boat. If we're *more* polished and prepared than the others, then we coast to an early lead. Plus since there are two of us competing that means we essentially get to talk twice as long as any other candidate without seeming wordy."

"That makes sense," Emilia nodded.

"We've got eight days. We need to make sure our speeches are prepared and we can answer any question that we're asked about our platforms at the party afterward. You ready to play hardball with some annoying nobles?"

Emilia smirked.

That evening, right before bed, Felt visited Emilia in her room. She could have let Subaru do this but doing it herself just seemed like more fun.

"Good evening, Felt," Emilia said, sitting on the bed and reading a book.

"Good evening yourself," Felt said, not bothering to conceal a vicious grin. She held something behind her back. "Subaru asked me to pick something up for you while I was in town. I figured you'd appreciate it if I gave it to you in private."

"A present?"

"Sort of," Felt handed her a bag full of small red balls.

Emilia inspected it for a moment in confusion. "Is it... candy?" She asked.

"Not exactly, although as a friend of mine who works the corners in the market district says: it does let us get the sugar," Felt smirked.

Emilia looked baffled.

Felt coughed. This wasn't going the way she had planned. "Um, Subaru asked me to pick this up for you... so that the two of you would be prepared in case you decided to... have some fun," Felt said awkwardly.

"I don't understand," Emilia replied.

Felt's face burned. This was proving to be much less fun than Felt had hoped. "Um, Emilia, you do know where babies come from, right?"

"Of course I do. Subaru explained it to me just the other day," Emilia replied.

"...Right," Felt muttered, wondering what the hell she'd gotten herself into here. "Anyway, women take these pills so that if they have sex they don't risk getting pregnant."

Emilia looked through the bag. "I need to eat all of these?" She asked dubiously.

"No," Felt sighed. "You take one every morning. That way if you and Subaru decide to do... something, you're ready."

Emilia blushed but nodded. "That... seems like a good idea."

"Great. Well, when you're about to run out just let me know and I'll get you a refill," Felt muttered, heading for the door.

"Emilia," Subaru said, stepping into the room. "I wanted to ask-oof," Subaru staggered as Felt plowed into him.

Felt glowered up at Subaru. "I just want you to know that this was all your fault," She proclaimed. She then stepped around the baffled Subaru and left the room, muttering to herself.

Subaru stared at the departing Felt.

"Did I miss something?" He asked Emilia.

Emilia shrugged. "It might have something to do with these," Emilia said, indicting the bag with a sheepish look.

"Oh, what's that? The loot from her latest score?" Subaru asked, coming over and sitting beside Emilia.

"She said it was something I could take... so I wouldn't get pregnant," Emilia blushed.

Subaru turned scarlet. "Oh," He said. Subaru coughed. "Look, Emilia, this isn't because I want to pressure you into doing something you're not ready for it's just... if the right time comes and we're both ready, I wanted us to be prepared, you know?"

"I think that's a good idea," She replied with a slight smile.

A week flew by and Emilia and Subaru worked long days preparing for every possibility they could think of. They each rehearsed several speeches depending on what the other candidates said and they made sure they had dozens of prepared answers for every question they could think of.

Crop Rotations were still in the early stages in Arlem but so far the results were promising. Once the announcement at the royal selection was official, they would inform the rest of the villages in Roswaal's domain about the idea and potentially the Astrea territory as well. With Arlem proving this season that the idea had merit, the other villages would fall in line quickly.

Subaru's sewing machine was a huge success and the village women had already asked him if he could make a dozen more. Reinhard had brought to Arlem a trusted family friend named Sallis, who was a talented clockmaker. Sallis had spent years maintaining the large clocks in the Astrea manor and Reinhard brought him to Arlem in order for him to inspect the sewing machine and estimate the difficulty in reproducing it.

"I appreciate you coming all the way out here, Master Sallis," Subaru said, entering Petra's house with Sallis and Reinhard. Petra and her mother sat on the bed nearby. Subaru had asked them to be on hand to assist with the demonstration.

"Oh, it is my pleasure, Lord Subaru!" The clockmaker said. Sallis was a pasty man with a fussy demeanor. Nonetheless, Subaru liked him. He had a mad passion for his work and he shared Subaru's interest in gears and machinery. "Sir Reinhard mentioned a new kind of clock you wanted me to inspect?"

"It's not a clock, Master Sallis. It's a device that uses gears to reduce labor," Subaru clarified.

"Hm. I'm not familiar with such a device," Sallis mused.

"Well, here it is," Subaru said, pointing to the sewing machine.

Sallis inspected it with a frown. He turned the gears by hand and saw the needle move back and forth. "Forgive me, my lord, but I don't understand how these gears do anything."

"Petra? Would you please give us a demonstration?" Subaru asked with a smirk.

Petra bounded off the bed and ran to the machine with a bolt of cloth that she proceeded to stitch in seconds.

Petra cut the threads and showed Sallis the cloth with a flourish.

Sallis stared at it open mouthed. "This... this is fantastic! I never even imagined the possibility of such a device! Using

gears to stitch thread? It's brilliant!"

Sallis knelt down and grabbed a startled Petra's hands. "Young lady, you are a genius! This machine is simply incredible!" He gushed.

"Oh. I didn't make it," Petra murmured, looking very off-put by Sallis's adulation. "Lord Subaru did."

"Just 'Subaru' is fine, Petra," Subaru murmured with a sigh.

"Oh!" Sallis leapt to his feet and made a very low bow. "Forgive me, my lord! I misunderstood!"

"Don't worry about it, Master Sallis," Subaru replied. "Can you give us an estimate of how hard it would be to make more of these machines?"

"Of course, my lord!" Sallis inspected the gears carefully. "Most of these components appear similar to gears that I have in my workshop already. The strangely shaped gears below the needle and connected to the pedal would be a custom order. I work with a very talented blacksmith who supplies all my parts. I'm sure he could create molds for these gears in just a few weeks. The cost of materials after the molds are created should be nominal as would be the costs of assembly."

"Sounds promising," Subaru approved. "Would you be interested in working with us to create more of these machines? Also I have a few more devices I'm interested in testing. Would you be interested in helping us to bring the blueprints into reality?"

Sallis had a look of wonder on his face. "Absolutely, my lord! I can think of no more worthy pursuit for my art than to assist in making more works of genius such as this! Please consider me to be at your complete disposal!"

Sallis had headed home after that, almost too excited to sit still in the carriage.

Subaru and Reinhard walked back to the manor. "Well, he seems nice," Subaru observed.

"A good friend of the family," Reinhard agreed. "I'm glad to be able to provide him with additional work. Especially work that will have an enormous impact on the kingdom."

Tomorrow they would leave the manor for the capitol and the royal selection would officially begin.

Emilia and Subaru sat together in the garden. It had been a long day, their final day of preparation and they were grateful to just be able to relax for an hour.

"So you feel ready?" Subaru asked.

Emilia smiled at him. "I think so, what about you?"

"We got this," Subaru smirked.

They were silent for a moment.

"Subaru, do you really think we can win?" Emilia asked finally.

"I'm not sure yet," He admitted. "But I am sure that we can get the blood for you."

Emilia sighed. "Is that... is that the only reason we're doing this?"

Subaru glanced at her.

"I know in the beginning all I wanted was to get the blood and cure my people but now...What about Felt and all the people in the slums? What about Petra who may not have enough food this winter? What about all the people who feel justified in abusing demi-humans just for fun?"

Subaru took Emilia's hand. "Don't worry, we'll help them!" He promised.

"But what if we don't win-"

"We'll *still* help them," Subaru emphasized. "We are going to change the world, Mili. Sure, being King would make that easier but it's not essential. We could still help everyone get out of the slums by networking and connecting them with jobs. We could still spread knowledge of advanced agriculture and end hunger on the continent. We can push for the reform of the human-centric laws in Lagunica from down in the trenches with the demi-humans. So long as the two of us stay together, we will change this world."

Emilia smiled at him and shook her head. "Why does everything sound so easy when you say it?"

Suabru shook his head. "It won't be easy. It'll be hard. We'll have to fight against lots of entrenched interests for what we believe in. But a better world is something worth fighting for, isn't it?"

Emilia rested her head against his shoulder. "We should probably get to bed," She said. "Tomorrow is likely to be a long day."

"We have a couple of long days coming up actually," Subaru mused as the two of them left the garden and headed up

the stairs.

"Good night, your Majesty," Subaru said, giving Emilia the courtly bow that Reinhard had made Subaru practice for hours.

"Sweet dreams, you Majesty," Emilia laughed while giving an answering curtsy.

Subaru returned to his own room where he found Reinhard already in bed reading a book.

"You kept me waiting, in fact," Beatrice muttered from Subaru's bed.

"I'm sorry," Subaru apologized, kneeling down beside the bed to talk to Beatrice. "Sometimes I lose track of time when I'm with Mili."

"Hm. Well we should start reading from our book if we want to get to sleep before midnight, I suppose," Beatrice replied. The Great Spirit never bothered to change her clothes but she was clearly ready to go to sleep.

"Sounds like a plan," Subaru said, stripping down to his shorts and climbing into bed beside Beatrice.

The two of them were reading a collection of fairy tales. They'd gotten into the habit of trading off chapters, each of them taking a turn reading one chapter to the other. Subaru was about halfway through his chapter when he heard Beatrice's breathing become regular and saw that her eyes were closed.

"It seems I've lost my audience," Subaru murmured, putting a book mark in the book and gently putting it down beside the bed.

Subaru gently kissed Beatrice's forehead and settled down into bed beside her.

"You know, my friend, someday you are going to be a remarkable father," Reinhard observed.

Subaru chuckled, trying not wake Beatrice. "I'd ask you to tell that to Emilia but I'm not sure if that would help or hurt. Also, I hope the kids sleeping with me won't be a long term problem. It would make enjoying certain activities rather awkward."

Reinhard laughed as he put down his own book and turned off the lights. "Do you feel ready for the ceremony, my friend?"

"Oh yeah!" Subaru assured him. "We are *ready*. We are motivated, we are prepared, and we are going to go in there and blindside every single one of them."

"I greatly admire your optimism," Reinhard mused.

"Optimism? Reinhard, that's confidence. I have more advantages than I can count. When I reach the castle, I am walking in there with the ultimate knight. I'm going in there with Felt who can smell a con or an opportunity a mile away. I'm walking in the door with two Greater Spirits. And best of all, I'm going in there with the most wonderful woman in the world on my arm. With all of you by my side, how can I fail? Trust me buddy, we are going to make one hell of a splash."

"I look forward to it, my friend," Reinhard replied.

Late the next morning, Reinhard and Subaru had finished loading the carriage while Emilia, Puck, and Beatrice sat inside.

"We should leave shortly if we want to arrive in town before dark," Reinhard commented.

Subaru shrugged. "I think we're all set. We're just waiting on Felt and the twins."

At that moment, Rem and Ram exited the manor carrying Felt between them. Felt looked rather crestfallen.

The twins carried her down the steps and then put her down in front of Subaru.

Subaru nodded thoughtfully. "Should I ask or would I rather not?" He said to Ram.

"My sister and I decided to search Miss Felt thoroughly before our departure, just in case," Ram explained calmly.

Subaru looked aghast. "Oh come on, Ram! Was that really-"

"We discovered a variety of small valuable items that must have wound up in Miss Felt's pockets by accident," Ram continued matter-of-fact.

Subaru glowered at Felt who refused to meet his eyes. "Get in the damn carriage," He growled at her.

Felt quickly climbed in, followed by Reinhard and Ram.

Rem climbed onto the driver seat.

"Rem, are you sure you're OK driving the whole distance by yourself?" Subaru asked.

"I'll be fine, Lor- Subaru," She amended.

Subaru shrugged. "Well, let me know if you get tired. I admit, I don't really know how to drive a carriage but I can take a turn if you'd like."

"Thank you, Subaru, but I think I'll be fine. I'd much prefer not to end the journey by crashing into a tree," Rem said calmly.

Subaru looked up at Rem who appeared to be struggling to repress her laughter.

"This is good training, Rem," Subaru observed. "If I do wind up being King I'm going to spend the rest of my life being mocked, belittled, and burned in effigy so thank you for the practice," Subaru said as he climbed into the carriage.

Rem laughed out loud as she drove the carriage down the road.

They reached the capitol just after dark. Subaru and Emilia were holding hands while Beatrice dozed against Subaru's shoulder.

They were approaching the gate when the carriage came to a stop.

"Problem, Rem?" Subaru called.

"There's an accident ahead. We'll need to wait a few minutes," She replied.

Subaru looked at Reinhard. "Why don't we go see if there's anyway we can help?" He said, trying not to wake Beatrice as he coaxed her to lay against Emilia's shoulder.

Reinhard nodded and they slipped out of the carriage, leaving a very nervous Felt sitting next to a still annoyed Ram.

Two wagons had collided outside the city, probably when their earth dragons took a snap at each other. Fortunately the people and animals from the wagons all appeared to be fine, unfortunately the earth dragons were still struggling against each other.

"I'll calm the earth dragons," Reinhard said, speeding off.

Subaru walked down to the wagon where a teamster was picking up crates of merchandise off the road.

"Here, let me give you a hand," Subaru said, picking up a short spear that had been dislodged from a shattered crate.

These crates are all full of spears? Sounds like someone is preparing for a serious fight, Subaru worried.

Subaru brought the man the spear but noticed that the spear's head was moving back and forth. This wasn't because it was broken, it had clearly been designed with some care to ensure this was possible.

His curiosity peaked, Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*, examining the spear.

Interesting. It's not a spear, it's not even a weapon. It's a harpoon designed to be used in fishing. The flexible head suggests it's intended for use on large sea mammals like whales. Well, that's reassuring. At least someone isn't plotting a war.

"Thank you, my lord," The teamster said, taking the harpoon with a bow.

"Don't mention it," Subaru said, walking away.

Reinhard had managed to calm the earth dragons and coaxed by their drivers the beasts were helping move the wagons off the road so that traffic could pass.

Subaru met Reinhard who wore a very moody look and the two walked back to their carriage.

"My friend, I think we may have a problem," Reinhard murmured.

"Nothing new about that," He sighed. "What is it this time?"

"Did you see those crates full of spears?" Reinhard asked in a low voice. Before Subaru could answer Reinhard continued, "Those crates are all stamped with the sigil of House Karnstein."

"Karnstein?" Subaru asked in surprise. "As in Crusch Karnstein?"

Reinhard nodded.

Subaru frowned and shook his head. "Let's talk about this back in the carriage where we won't be overheard."

So Crusch is ordering a ton of harpoons... why? Is she trying to revolutionize the fishing industry? That doesn't sound like Crusch as she's been described to me. So what is she after? I guess she would need some kind of economic plank in her platform but I don't think Lagunica really has a large fishing industry. Maybe she means to invent one? It would be a good idea but it's going to be a heavy lift in a world where most people can't sail or swim.

Reinhard and Subaru climbed back into the carriage. A few moments later the carriage began to move down the road.

"Was anyone hurt?" Emilia asked.

"Some scratches and minor cuts on the earth dragons. The people were fine," Reinhard replied. "However, I learned something concerning. The crates on the wagon were all bearing the sigil of House Karnstein."

"Could you see what was inside them?" Felt asked intently.

Reinhard nodded. "Spears. A lot of spears."

"So she's planning to attack someone," Felt mused. "It makes sense. If she plans to start a war she'd obviously want you on her team, Red."

"They aren't spears," Subaru disagreed. "They're harpoons. Or something similar anyway."

"What's a harpoon?" Emilia asked.

"It's a tool used in fishing," Subaru explained.

"So she's... going after fish?" Felt asked.

"Apparently really big fish. Those harpoons are the kind you'd use if you were going after big game, like large seals, dolphins, and whales," Subaru said.

"Whales?" Felt and Reinhard said in stereo.

They exchanged a long look full of trepidation.

Subaru glanced at Emilia but she seemed as confused as he was.

"I sense you guys have an idea," Subaru prodded.

"Crusch is going after the White Whale," Felt pronounced. "No other explanation."

"The White Whale..." Subaru rummaged through his memory. "That was one of the three great mabeasts we talked about, wasn't it? Why do you think that's what Crusch is after?"

"The White Whale has been a plague on these lands for centuries. The beast is a terrible threat to travelers and often disrupts major trade routes. Slaying it would be an enormous credit to whichever candidate accomplished the act. It killed my grandmother years ago," Reinhard explained.

"And Crusch mentioned his grandfather when she tried to recruit Red for her big mission," Felt added.

"I see. Crusch tries to recruit you for something involving your grandfather and she's stockpiling harpoons. Yup, I think we have a winner," Subaru agreed.

"So what are we going to do about it?" Emilia asked.

Subaru glanced at her.

"You said we should have a counter for everything our rivals propose to do so don't we need to do something that's impressive enough to take attention away from Crusch trying to kill the whale?" Emilia said.

"Fair point," Subaru mused.

"We could promise to kill the Great Rabbit or the Black Snake?" Reinhard suggested.

Emilia blinked and rubbed her head as if it pained her but Subaru didn't notice.

"Can we do *any* of that?" Subaru asked dubiously. "I mean it's not like we have an army."

"I will see it done," Reinhard said as if discussing working a double shift.

Emilia and Subaru shared a dubious look. "Red, I know you are like *super* powerful but are you really sure you could take on monsters like these? You're a good friend, Red. I don't want to put you at any risk."

Felt burst out laughing and even Reinhard chuckled.

Subaru checked if Emilia knew what was going on but she just shook her head. "Care to let us in on the joke, guys?" Subaru asked.

"Sorry, Subaru," Felt giggled. "But I'm just now realizing that you honestly have no idea how powerful Red actually is."

"I've tried to keep it that way," Reinhard added. "I must admit, I enjoy being valued for myself rather than my abilities."

"You certainly are valued, buddy. You were my first friend here. For a while, you were my only friend!" Subaru said. "I'm grateful that you're willing to help, I just don't want to risk your life just so we can take a throne. It's absolutely not worth it."

Emilia nodded in agreement.

Reinhard's eyes grew rather watery.

"Ugh, knock it off, you two. You're going to make the poor dope cry!" Felt said.

Reinhard wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "Have no fear, my friend. Choose the objective and I will see it carried out. The only potential concern is that we must find our prey in Lagunica before I can pursue it."

"Oh right, you're not allowed to leave the country," Subaru remembered. "That's got to be annoying!"

"It's not ideal," Reinhard admitted.

"We can deal with that later," Felt interjected. "So who's the better target: the rabbit or the snake?"

Subaru thought about it for a moment. "Let's hold off on that call. I have a sneaking suspicion... if Crusch decides to be overly cautious we might be able to do even better..."

"Greetings to you aaaall," Roswaal said when they met him at the hotel.

"Greetings, Lord Roswaal," Subaru and Emilia bowed together.

"Soo tomorrow is the big day. You must both be sooo excited," He continued.

"Very much so," Subaru agreed, pausing long enough to discretely kick Felt who was struggling not to burst out laughing at Roswaal's unique fashion sense and mode of speech.

"There is unfortunately one minor problem," Roswaal said. "The hotel is completely full tonight and two of us will need to share a bed. I volunteered Lord Subaru and Lady Emilia as I assumed that would not be a problem."

Subaru and Emilia both turned red and looked down at the floor.

"That should be fine," Subaru said.

"I'm sure we can manage," Emilia said at the same time.

They were blushing but they were also both smiling.

Felt wore a vicious grin. She started to make a comment but Reinhard grabbed her, covering her mouth.

Felt looked at him with annoyance as the hotel maids led everyone to their rooms.

Subaru had just finished reading to Beatrice in her room. Tonight, surprisingly enough, she was joined by Puck. Beatrice had fallen asleep cuddling Puck and Subaru kissed her forehead. He briefly considered giving Puck a kiss goodnight but reason quickly reasserted itself.

Subaru returned to his own room and found Emilia dressed for bed and brushing her hair.

"Hello, Subaru," She said, looking away from him with red cheeks.

"Hello, Emilia," Subaru said a little awkwardly as he began to strip down to his shorts. "So Puck is sleeping with Beatrice tonight? What did you have to offer Puck to get him to agree to that?"

"Nothing actually. I didn't even think of asking him. He volunteered," Emilia replied, coming over to the bed.

"Huh, well that was nice of him," Subaru murmured as he and Emilia lay down on top of the covers, staring up at the ceiling together.

"We've been so busy this past week that we haven't really had any time alone together except when we're working," Emilia commented.

"Yeah," Subaru agreed, slipping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her a little closer. "I'd ask what you've been doing with yourself lately but since we spent every minute of everyday preparing for tomorrow, I guess I already know the answer."

Emilia poked his stomach in mock annoyance.

Subaru chuckled.

"And tomorrow is just the beginning," Emilia murmured. "We're going to be doing this for two years."

"Win or lose, I think we'll be doing this kind of stuff for a lot longer than that, Mili," Subaru whispered into her hair. "But after tomorrow we don't have an exact time table anymore. We can take a break. We can take some time for ourselves."

"That sounds wonderful," Emilia sighed.

They were both quiet for a moment.

"Subaru, I've been meaning to tell you that I've been taking that medicine Felt got me," Emilia whispered.

Subaru flushed, he wasn't sure if it was from fear or excitement. "Really?"

"Mmmhmm," Emilia sighed. "But I think we'll need to be well rested for tomorrow."

Subaru nodded. "Yeah... I guess you're right."

"But after tomorrow... we can relax a little... can't we?" She asked.

Subaru could hear the smile in her voice.

Subaru laughed. "Are you trying to make me crazy?"

Emilia pushed Subaru down and half climbed on top of him, smirking down at Subaru. "And why not? Haven't you been driving me crazy since the day we met?"

"What?! Hey, that's not how I remember it! You're the one who convinced me to go chasing down a stolen insignia and almost got me cut in half!" Subaru laughed.

Emilia slapped her hands down on his chest as if stomping on him but her grin widened. "Don't joke about that! That was scary!"

He laughed again. "Yeah! I guess I didn't have as much time to be scared as you did since I passed out from blood loss!"

"You are awful!" Emilia laughed.

"But you love me anyway! Don't you?" Subaru asked suddenly smug. He reached up and brushed her hair back from her face

Emilia froze and then slowly nodded. "Yes. I do. I love you, Subaru Natsuki," She whispered.

Subaru cupped her cheek.

"Subaru, do you-"

"I love you more than anyone. More than anything," Subaru replied earnestly. "I have no doubt that you are why I came here. You are what I came here to find. And I will change this whole world to build you a place where you can be truly happy."

Emilia looked down at him with watery eyes but even Subaru knew that these were tears of happiness. "I love you, Subaru. But I never expected you to make me happy."

Subaru frowned up at Emilia with concern.

"We'll make our own happiness, together," She explained.

Subaru's eyes got pretty misty themselves and he drew Emilia down to him for a kiss. The two wrapped around each other caressing and cuddling each other.

This continued for several minutes until Emilia drew back. "You do realize we should get to sleep, don't you?" She asked him with heavy eyes.

Subaru groaned with mock annoyance. "Damn, Mili. Why do you always have to be so responsible?"

"Don't pout, Subaru," She murmured primly. "We have all the time in the world to enjoy ourselves after the presentation tomorrow."

They slipped under the covers.

"If you keep talking like that, I'm liable to cut my speech short just so we can get back here faster!" Subaru snorted.

Emilia laughed and turned away from him.

Subaru slipped closer to Emilia and wrapped his arm around her; smelling her fragrant hair as they snuggled together. They'd never laid like this before much less been in bed together but it was so peaceful, so comfortable. It was like they'd been waiting to come here since they met and everything had finally snapped into place. This was by no means the last step on their journey together but it was enough for tonight.

They were both fast asleep in seconds.

The next morning everyone was up before the sun, preparing for the big day.

Reinhard and Roswaal had already departed to the castle. Everyone else was finishing getting ready.

Reinhard had worked with Petra and her mother to make special clothing for the occasions so that Subaru and Emilia would appear to be part of the same set during the presentation. Felt had pointed out that Petra and her mother were the perfect candidates to make the clothing under Reinhard's supervision; not only were they both talented tailors but now Subaru and the others could easily brag in conversation about how quickly these high quality clothes were produced using Subaru's new machine.

So Reinhard is also a talented fashion designer. Can that man do everything? Will he tell me one day that he could have

healed the Elinor forest with a snap of his fingers but he thought that doing it this way would be more fun?

Subaru's outfit closely matched Reinhard's own uniform, albeit with different colors, while Emilia's was similar to her normal clothes. The color scheme was based off Emilia's standard white and purple but for the presentation Reinhard had added a silver trim to Emilia's usual outfit while Subaru's had gold.

Emilia was beaming to be dressed as part of a matched set with Subaru.

"So how do I look?" Puck's voice came out of the majestic mane-less white lion sitting next to Emilia.

"Very regal," Subaru compliment. "It suits you."

Felt had persuaded Puck to transform into something grander for the occasion.

I will never underestimate that girl again! Subaru thought to himself after seeing Puck's new appearance.

Beatrice's normal clothing sufficed for the presentation but Felt had managed to talk her into swapping out her normal colors for white, silver, and purple to be part of Subaru and Emilia's set.

Felt was the last to get changed into the clothes Reinhard and the Leytes had prepared for her. The girl emerged from her room clearly feeling out of place. She was wearing a long yellow gown, white shoes and a small silver circlet in her hair that stopped just short of being a tiara.

"I feel ridiculous!" Felt moaned.

"I think you look beautiful!" Subaru said. "I suppose we all feel a little silly when we're dressed up like this but you know why we're doing it."

Felt sighed. "Yeah, yeah, Red went over it with me a thousand times," Felt's voice took on the singsong tone of something that had been memorized. "This is a formal occasion at the royal palace and both etiquette and custom requires a certain standard of dress and behavior to be observed."

Subaru frowned. "Well, yeah, that's all true," He agreed, hoisting Beatrice onto her favorite seat: his shoulder. "However, it has nothing to do with why you're dressed up like that."

"What do you mean?" Felt asked.

Subaru snorted. "Do I really have to spell it out for you? It's part of the con!"

Emilia stared at Subaru but Subaru was focusing on Felt.

"This is just like when you pretended to be an idiot while you talked to Crusch the other day. You knew what she wanted and expected you to be, and you became that so you could manipulate her. This is the exact same thing. You have a whole crowd of rich idiots in that castle just waiting to be manipulated. We're planning to empty the slums right? Well, that could take us decades. Think of every nobleman you convince that destroying the slums is a worthwhile venture as reducing that time by years."

Subaru walked over to a suddenly thoughtful Felt with Beatrice riding his shoulder. "Those people know that you're from the slums. They expect you to walk in there in rags, flip off the duchess, and drop the punchbowl on the floor. They have absolutely no expectations of you whatsoever. Can you think of *anything* more fun than proving them all wrong? You know, a very clever lady once told me: there's nobody easier to scam than someone who thinks they're smarter than you."

Felt's eyes hardened.

"Show them you can play their game. Show them you can play it better than they ever could! Give these nobles a heroic Felt who climbed out of the slums using nothing but her wits and her iron will and is now determined to go back and rescue everyone she left behind. They'll lap it up! You'll have them eating out of your hand in five minutes," Subaru finished.

Felt's thought about it and her eyes widened. "You're right! This is just a con like any other con I've run. I've done weirder stuff than this! Bring it on, I'll have those overdressed pansies for lunch!"

"That's my girl," Subaru approved.

Beatrice tugged on Subaru's ear.

"Betty is your girl, in fact," She reminded him petulantly.

"I'd also like to be included in there somewhere," Emilia smirked.

"Alright!" Subaru threw up his hands. "Let's just get out of here before I get in even more trouble!"

Crusch Karnstein and her knight Felix had been at the castle for some time. They had gotten to the presentation early to watch and to get the lay of the battlefield before the action started. Crusch had long green hair and, unlike other ladies of the court, she had arrived in her military uniform and a sword belted at her side. Felix was a brown haired man with demi-human blood, revealed by his cat ears and tail. Felix often preferred to wear women's clothing but tonight he was in knightly uniform.

So far nothing worth reporting had happened. Anastasia hadn't arrived yet and Priscilla was holding court, lecturing a group of supporters on how wonderful she was. Priscilla was staggeringly beautiful with long blond hair and blood red eyes. She wore an elaborate red dress. Her knight Al leaned against a wall nearby. Al wore a helmet that concealed his entire face. He also wore a thin vest that left his torso exposed and loose pants. He'd lost an arm in battle some years ago.

"Crusch, look nya," Felix whispered.

Crusch turned to look at the door as the Natsuki party arrived.

Their entrance at least was impressive. Subaru and Emilia Natsuki entered the castle in immaculate white clothes that screamed both money and taste. They were also accompanied by some kind of tame white lion. This helped to solidify Crusch's initial impression of the Natsuki camp: all flash, no heat.

Subaru Natsuki brought a little girl here... his daughter? Crush mused, *No, Subaru isn't old enough to have fathered a girl this age. His younger sister, perhaps? That seems more likely.*

Emilia really is a silver haired half-elf. She's not even trying to hide it! I had wondered if that rumor might have just been a smear campaign. It's bizarre that she even bothered to show up here. She'll be lucky not to be lynched by an angry mob during the presentation.

Who is that young noblewoman with Emilia? I don't recognize her. That is unacceptable. I should know all of the nobility and other players in the kingdom. These lapses can have massive consequences and I have no patience for such things.

A group of nobles saw the Natsukis enter the castle and began to approach the party.

Crusch watched the Natsukis interact with the nobles. Their camp appeared to be polite and even charming, but there was no real substance in evidence yet.

This is all smalltalk. I hate smalltalk, Crush thought. *The nobles aren't asking the Natsukis anything of substance and the Natsukis aren't volunteering anything. That either means that they are smart enough not to tip their hand before the presentation or they simply have nothing of substance to say. I'm inclined to suspect the latter.*

Crusch noticed that Priscilla was glaring at the Natsukis. It was likely that she felt slighted because her own throng of well wishers had been reduced as they went to greet someone else.

"Hm. Incoming, nya," Felix murmured.

Priscilla marched over to the Natsukis, forcing her way through the crowd.

"What's this? A filthy little half-elf? I assumed that all these people would at least be looking at something interesting. Sadly, it's just a disgusting bore," Priscilla smirked as she turned away.

"Perhaps these fine people are here because *you* were boring them, Priscilla," Subaru called, slipping the little girl off his shoulder. Priscilla froze in her tracks. "After all, there are only so many ways for you to say how amazing you think you are before it starts to get a bit repetitious."

Crusch raised an eyebrow. *This* could get ugly quick.

Crusch noticed Al, Priscilla's knight, coming over to intervene.

For a moment Priscilla was paralyzed by shock. Someone had dared to insult her? In public? Unacceptable. This could not be endured and in fact she would not endure it.

Priscilla spun around drawing out of thin air, the Yang Sword, her enchanted blade that could only be wielded by one of Vollachian royal blood. She thrust the sword at Subaru's chest with all her strength.

Sabaru extended his palm to meet the blade and the sword... stopped as if it had struck a mountain.

Subaru grabbed the blade in his hand and wrenched it out of Priscilla's grip. It flipped end over end overhead until Subaru caught the handle as it descended .

"This is a marvelous sword," Subaru admired the flaming blade, as calmly as if they were discussing it over tea. "Lady Priscilla, this was a kingly gift. You truly shouldn't have," His voice descended into mockery.

Priscilla Barielle's jaw was on the floor as she gaped at Subaru Natsuki. No one had ever survived Priscilla's attack before. Nor had she ever thought it was even possible for the sword to be wrenched from her grip.

Crusch would have looked just as shocked as Priscilla if not for her iron will. Crusch was a duke and the daughter of a duke. She'd been in politics in one form or another since the day she was born. She would never let emotion show on her face in public without due consideration. However, this had been truly shocking. Subaru had *blocked* the unstoppable Yang Sword, said to be able to pierce anything, with his bare hand and then he had simply taken this legendary sword away from Priscilla.

How was this done? Could even the Sword Saint have endured Priscilla's attack unflinching? He would certainly have had the victory over Priscilla without any effort but wouldn't Priscilla's attack have had some kind of effect on him? What kind of person is Subaru Natsuki and what magic does he command that allows him to shrug off a blow from one of the most powerful weapons in the world?!

"How... How are you doing this?!" Priscilla demanded.

"Oh, I have my ways," Subaru mused, still studying the sword.

Subaru abruptly plunged the sword into the castle floor stones. He hoisted the little girl back on his shoulder, gave Emilia his hand, and his party calmly walked away. Subaru lightly bumped into Priscilla's shoulder as he passed her.

That was no accident, Crush thought.

"You know, Priscilla," Subaru commented, "You really need to bring something more than just luck to the table if you want to get ahead in this contest. We're talking about the fate of nations here, not a game of dice," Subaru called over his shoulder as his party calmly walked away.

Priscilla stood there stupefied for long seconds as the entire room began to murmur around her. She quickly recovered and grabbed her sword, banishing it back to the ether. Priscilla whirled on the departing Natsuki party, glaring at them with eyes of flame.

"Nya. Well, you don't see that everyday," Felix observed as Al tried to soothe Priscilla's raging fury.

Don't panic! Just think it through, Crusch attempted to discipline her racing mind. *On the one hand, Subaru has just done me a large favor. He dealt a serious blow to Priscilla's candidacy before the game even properly began. I've always considered Priscilla to be my most serious rival. Her luck is a potent offering to the people of Lagunica, and one that I wasn't sure I could easily match. Once the Lagunican citizens become her citizens her luck would benefit them as well. Priscilla's luck works like magic and she had already convinced a large chunk of the nobility that her luck could see her, and the kingdom, through any problem no matter what choices she made.*

Now in one move, Subaru Natsuki has publicly called that claim into question. He has embarrassed her in public, laughed off her strongest attack, and then stolen her greatest weapon without any apparent effort. All of this was done while Priscilla stood by helplessly, too shocked to even try and retake control. Priscilla has lost more from this interaction than might first be guessed: A myth of infallibility, once questioned, will not quickly rebound.

All of this is clearly to my good. However, the problem is that if this entire gambit wasn't produced by chance and dumb luck, then the Natsuki camp, which I've always dismissed as not even taking the selection seriously, not only commands powerful magic of an unknown type, but they just performed a political coup worthy of a master strategist. Beyond that, the idea that anyone has the power to block the Yang sword barehanded, much less rip it out of Priscilla's grip, is nearly terrifying.

Crusch watched the Natsuki camp depart and when the young noblewoman turned around for a moment, Crusch's heart almost stopped. She recognized the girl's strange red eyes. This was no noblewoman, this was the same ignorant street waif she had met with Reinhard van Astrea a few weeks ago.

The girl met Crusch's eyes for a moment and smirked before hurrying to catch up with her camp.

What is happening here?! When did I lose control of this situation?!

Shortly thereafter the candidates were all called to assemble.

The Natsukis are attracting most of the attention right now, Crush observed. *They have two candidates who are publicly in love, which is already quite the PR coup, they also possess two different sponsors from two powerful families. Beyond that the rumors of Subaru Natsuki killing a troll with his bare hands were running wild in the city and I fear that the nobility is starting to believe them. Actually, after watching him disarm Priscilla, I think that I am starting to believe them as well. How did I misinterpret this situation so drastically?!*

Never mind that now. Focus. Emilia's appearance and race are major strikes against her candidacy and that is exploitable. She will limit her fiance's appeal.

Crusch glanced at the crowd and saw with concern that while her race and appearance appeared to be common topics of conversation, as fascination with her camp built up, more and more people seemed prepared to at least consider overlooking them.

McMahon announced the beginning of the selection and made a lot of formal points that Crusch barely heard. She was watching her competition like a hawk for any sign of weakness or any source of advantage.

McMahon finally finished and gestured for Priscilla to make her statement.

"Presenting Baroness Priscilla Barielle, the Sun Princess, accompanied by her knight Aldebaran," The herald proclaimed.

Al stepped forward. "Lady Priscilla's luck is famous for a reason. Her decisions always turn out to be the correct ones in the long run. She's taken over impoverished regions and made them prosperous again. She's dealt with powerful attacks and caused them to backfire on her foes. She's the perfect person to take command of this entire country. I've watched her miraculously pull victory from certain defeat time and time again. Trust me, she'll do no less in this election."

Al stepped back.

Not a terribly good speech but it was a good introduction for Priscilla. She might be able to use it to recover some of

her lost stature and mystique if she capitalizes on it.

Priscilla stepped forward with her pale cheeks visibly flushed and her mouth a grim slash.

Subaru's play was more impressive than I realized. Priscilla still hasn't recovered her lost temper. That's going to be mistake number one. She looks visibly angry and spiteful and that will cost her support. I also know without question that Priscilla hasn't bothered to prepare a statement. She'll have trusted her luck to carry her through this without any effort on her part. She's also been recently mocked for her self-centered arrogance. If she comes across as arrogant in her speech she'll add fuel to that fire and risk proving her accuser right. Priscilla needs to make a quick recovery now and she seems ill-equipped to do so.

"You all know me," Priscilla declared. "My actions right or wrong always turn out to the good. You should all wish to be mine and trust in me to make these decisions for you as they will always turn out for the best. I will restore Lagunica to prosperity and prominence."

Priscilla stepped back fuming. There was some scattered applause that stopped quickly.

Crusch shook her head. *It wasn't necessarily a bad speech but it was a weak speech and it doesn't give Priscilla the lift she needed after her recent public drubbing. She's going to start the contest behind the other candidates and she'll need to catch up. All of this is to my benefit.*

"Presenting Duchess Crusch Karnstein, the Goddess of War, accompanied by her knight Felix Argyle," The herald announced.

Felix stepped forward. "Nya, the noble house of Karnstein has been a pillar of the kingdom since the days of the old Lion Kings. My mistress has been on the front lines in countless battles, leading Lagunican troops to victory and protecting Lagunican lives from foreign aggression. Many of you owe my lady your lives whether you know it or not. She has spent a lifetime protecting Lagunica and she is the most appropriate person to guide the nation forward."

Felix bowed as Crusch stepped forward. "I am Duchess Crusch Karnstein a proud Lagunican patriot. I wish to be King for all Lagunicans to restore our lost pride and dignity and to protect us from the other nations who threaten us. Under my leadership I will force the Dragon to abandon its pact with our people and return the sovereignty of our nation to the people where it belongs."

Crusch stepped back. *Hm. I got much more effusive applause than Priscilla had but it's not nearly as loud as I hoped. Felix warned me repeatedly not to make any reference to ending the pact with the dragon in my speech. He said that this type of sweeping reform was best worked up to after earning people's trust. My personal instinct was to always be forthright with your intentions and I acted accordingly. Perhaps this was not the best move.*

Crusch glanced down the line and saw Subaru Natsuki watching her closely. He quickly turned away.

Crusch fought not to bite her lip. *What is he thinking? He was looking at me like a predator about to pounce. He thinks I made a mistake and one that he can exploit. Was it the comment about ending the dragon pact? How would he exploit that?*

"Presenting Miss Anastasia Hoshin, the Greedy Princess, accompanied by her knight Julius Juukulius," The herald said.

Julius was a handsome purple haired man in a knight's uniform. He stepped forward with his hand over his heart. "I am proud to stand here today and offer my strength to Lady Anastasia. She began her life with nothing, not even her own name but through cunning and sheer will power she fought her way out of poverty. She worked as a humble clerk until she obtained sufficient capital and influence to open her own shop and now she has built her company into the largest trading firm in the entire world. My lady's efforts have lifted thousands out of poverty and into good lives. She has campaigned tirelessly to outlaw slavery in the Karangi provinces. The Lady Anastasia is precisely whom Lagunica needs to rebuild our faltering economy and secure our future."

Julius bowed as Anastasia stepped forward. Anastasia was a short woman with purple hair. She wore a fur turban and a fur shawl around a white dress.

"Well, who would have thought I'd ever be standing here? My name is Anastasia and I've worked my way out of poverty and built the biggest trading company in the world. Now I've decided that I want my own country. I take the best of care of everything I own. If I'm chosen I will revitalize the economy, end slavery, and lead to a resurgent revitalized working class."

It was a solid speech, short and sweet. Not many people in Lagunica know much about Anastasia or her accomplishments, which will be one of her major stumbling blocks in the campaign. Her speech introduced herself and her platform as well as giving everyone something to think about and a reason to remember her. Her speech also had good synergy with Julius's introduction. It's a solid sales pitch from a master merchant.

Now came the party that everyone was waiting to hear from.

"Presenting Lord Subaru Natsuki and Lady Emilia Natsuki. Accompanied by their contracted partners the Great Spirit of Fire and the Great Spirit of Yin. With them are their sponsors: Lord Roswaal M. Mathers and Sir Reinhard van Astrea. Also accompanying them is their adviser Miss Felt."

Crusch's mouth went dry. *They made contracts with not one but two Great Spirits?! I can hear the room buzzing around me from that revelation. I can't even blame the people. Was that how Subaru had survived the Yang sword? The blond waif is an adviser to the camp?! She must be supremely important to their faction to be standing with them during the announcement. What could she have offered them to ingratiate herself so thoroughly? Money? An intelligence network?*

However she joined the camp, the woman is dangerous. She was clearly intelligent and clever enough to fool me into thinking that she was nothing more than an ignorant slum girl when she wanted to. I never sensed a single false word from her even with my Divine Blessing. Could she have blocked it with some kind of strange magic, could that have been her offering to the candidates? Could she be a mage of frightening power?

Crusch cursed herself for being so blind during her conversation with Reinhard. She had blundered into a trap with her eyes wide open.

Reinhard stepped forward with his head held high. "I met Lord Subaru by a strange chance, if chance it was. I found him fighting against a vastly superior foe risking his own life to save people he had known for less than a day. This act of heroism, committed in a dark room where likely no one would ever even know of it, nearly cost him his life. I am proud to stand here today and pledge my enduring loyalty to Lord Subaru, the man I myself revere as King."

A murmur went around the room.

That was a solid endorsement, Crush admitted. Reinhard van Astrea's passion is striking and it impressed damn near everyone in this room. He might be less eloquent than some but no one in this room was more fervent in their conviction.

Roswaal was now espousing on Lady Emilia's virtues but Crusch focused on Reinhard and Subaru.

Is Subaru actually wiping a tear from his eye? No one is that good an actor! Regardless, Reinhard van Astrea clearly holds his lord in vast admiration and believes that he truly deserves the throne.

I'll have to cross him off my list of potential recruits to my faction.

Finally Subaru stepped forward to an utterly silent room. "I am Subaru Natsuki and I come from beyond the Great Waterfall," A gasp went around the room and even the sages became more attentive. "The hand of fate has brought me to this land and it is fate that brings me here today. I have been offered the chance to return in kind the beneficence that has been showered on me by my adopted home and I wish to seize this opportunity with both hands. The Natsuki camp has committed over the course of the royal selection to eliminate hunger within the domains loyal to us," The crowd murmured but Subaru kept talking. "I am bringing advanced techniques of agriculture and machinery from my homeland to create a revolution in food production and labor. The other challenge that the Natsuki camp has set for itself is to end the long ravages of a plague on this land that has stolen too many lives for far too long. Today the Natsuki camp declares war on the White Whale."

The crowd gasped.

"Before the selection is complete I promise that the White Whale will be slain and its long depredations shall be avenged. This is my offering to the people of Lagunica. What happens in the future, is for you to decide."

Subaru gave a slight bow and stepped back.

Crusch angrily closed her mouth. She realized she had been gaping at Subaru as much as Priscilla and Anastasia.

Stop! Focus, think, and recover! Wait, there's no applause after his speech? That's good news. No wait, look at those faces! That silence isn't born of disdain it's awe. Subaru has stolen a march on all of us and worse his strategy was transparently simple. We all spoke in broad generalities. We avoided committing to anything because if something went wrong it would damage our campaigns. Subaru has outlined specific promises that he will try to fulfill to establish his capabilities and his ability to carry his designs through to completion. It's an aggressive and risky strategy. If he fails to carry out either of these extraordinarily ambitious promises his ability will be called into question and his support will plummet. If he succeeds on the other hands...

Blast it! Why didn't I make a bold move like that? This is no coincidence. Somehow Subaru discovered that my plan was to hunt down and kill the White Whale. If I'd accomplished that task, a feat dreamed about for centuries, my ascension to the throne would have been assured. That was the mistake that Subaru saw in my speech. I had the chance to declare my intentions first and I let it slip away! I knew that publicly calling out my plan was a gamble and that's why my instincts held me back and kept me to the slow and steady path. If I attempted to hunt down the beast and failed with the eyes of the entire kingdom watching me, the backlash might well have been fatal to my candidacy. Worse, candor compels me to admit that I might well have failed in my attempt. Unless I could have acquired the services of the Sword Saint. Then victory would have been assured.

Somehow Reinhard and the girl Felt had divined my intentions during our conversation. How? I made no slips that could have led them to that conclusion. What had given it away? Could they have a spy in my camp? Felt had at one point implied that she thought I had a spy in their camp, why would she think that? She must have assumed that I had a spy because they had a spy as well! It's a common fallacy to assume that others in a situation would behave exactly as you would and perhaps Felt fell into that fallacy. Perhaps Felt works as their spy master?

No wait, if Felt thought I had a spy in her camp, she wouldn't have believed me when I suggested that I believed Subaru would withdraw. She would have assumed it was bait and refused to bite. Or did she bite deliberately just to lure me into a false sense of security? Damn it, there are too many questions!

What can I do to recover from this? Attacking the whale is now a fool's errand. It will make me looking grasping and spiteful. Worse if the attack is a disaster I'll be blamed for all the deaths when the Sword Saint would have guaranteed victory without loss of life if I had only waited. If Subaru does kill the whale then what can I do to compete with him? Kill the black snake? No, it wouldn't be equivalent. The snake rarely appears so it doesn't affect people's lives the same

way. Kill a sin archbishop? End the fighting and warfare along the southern border?

Subaru has made two promises. If I can't prevent him from killing the whale what if I sabotaged his agricultural reforms, assuming I can? That would at least cast doubt on him, people would start to wonder if his confidence exceeds his ability.

Emilia had stepped forward and placed her hand over her heart. Crusch's attention snapped back to focus on her.

"If I say less than my husband it is only because we agree on so many things. If he, or by some chance I, are chosen to lead this nation then I dream of creating a Kingdom where everyone regardless of race and class is equal in the eyes of the law. Since coming to this city I have spent a great deal of time in the slums, learning about the deprivation and misery under which its people live. In the great Dragon Kingdom of Lagunica, no one should be going to bed hungry, dressed in rags, or be forced to sleep out in the rain. As such the Natsuki camp is committing to expanding the manufacture of textile and clothing in the kingdom to ensure that no one in our kingdom struggles to cloth themselves. More importantly, the Natsuki camp is committing to a bold plan to empty the slums completely, to find its occupants real jobs and homes to live in. Our camp is promising to end the constant surge of people flowing into the slums and to begin these people's exodus to new lives in the country where they can be shown the dignity and respect that all people deserve. Thank you," Emilia bowed and stepped back.

The crowd wasn't silent after this speech. They were murmuring among themselves but it sounded cautiously approving.

McMahon ended the ceremony and it was apparent to everyone that public opinion had crowned a new front runner.

Crusch had shaken hands and answered questions but her mind was elsewhere. Her campaign plan was in shambles and she either needed to adapt or give up.

Crusch was not a person who gave up.

Mostly Crusch watched her new competition. Subaru was clearly the most popular candidate tonight. He was smart, personable, and able to answer questions about his policies quickly and easily. His ideas were bold and many people who approached him confessed that they had serious doubts about their feasibility but they were all impressed by the easy way he addressed all their concerns and by his unflinching confidence.

There is something odd about his charisma, his confidence seems almost supernatural.

Ultimately, nearly all of his critics decided to withhold judgment and see what happened.

Emilia appeared only slightly less popular than Subaru, itself a remarkable achievement for a demi-human. Emilia was passionate, self-assured, and calm enough to ignore a variety of digs at her race and appearance. She outshone her detractors by ignoring them and staying on message. Eventually the crowd turned on her hecklers.

The most surprising of all would have to be Felt. She had gathered up a large group of admirers and was holding court to them; regaling them with funny and exciting stories about her childhood in the slums. For the nobles this was rare entertainment and the gruesome and shocking images, which Felt slipped in here and there about how short and miserable life in the slums could be, were merely a byproduct, but in time those images would stay with the audience even after the story had faded.

Felt never actually asked anyone for help emptying the slums, she simply stood there and let her poise and obvious intelligence demonstrate that the people who grew up on these streets could be as talented as anyone else. The nobles didn't notice it consciously but none of them missed her point either.

After a while Crusch decided she had accomplished all she could hope to at the presentation and left the party with Felix to go home and strategize. She was back at square one.

Subaru and company had left the party just after lunch time. They could have stuck around a while longer and Priscilla and Anastasia appeared poised to do just that but Felt suggested leaving a little early to preserve their mystique. Subaru and Emilia were not hard to convince. Although the past few hours had flown by quickly they had also been extremely mentally taxing.

Subaru and Emilia were in their room getting changed into their normal clothes.

Roswaal had offered to put them in separate rooms tonight but they had both politely declined.

"You were amazing," Subaru said getting out of his formal attire with relief.

"What do you mean?" Emilia asked getting changed behind him.

"You were *amazing*," Subaru repeated. "Almost half of the people who came to talk to you were ready to drop ethnic slurs. Honestly, I wanted to intercept most of them and tell them to leave you the hell alone."

"That's sweet, Subaru but slurs are nothing I haven't heard before. I can take care of myself," Emilia replied.

"You sure can. I need to remember that more often. You won a ton of people over. I looked at a big portion of that crowd and I thought there was no way they would even listen to you but you got them to look past your race and convinced them to hear you out. That's amazing. You not only did something huge for the selection, convincing all those nobles to

see you as person was a huge step forward for the rights of demi-humans across the entire kingdom. You should be proud," Subaru paused. "I know that I'm proud of you."

Emilia didn't answer.

"What do you think we should do for the rest of the day?" Subaru asked.

"Truthfully, I want to go and check on Felt. I think she might be having some... identity issues right now," Emilia replied.

Subaru sighed. "What have we done to that poor girl?"

By now Felt had switched back into her standard outfit. She was lying in a chair looking almost sick, tended to by a puzzled Reinhard.

"Ugh. I feel like I need to bathe!" Felt complained.

"Well you certainly did very well. Everyone loved you! You have the ear of the entire kingdom," Subaru said with a smile.

"Man. Now I know how the whores in the slums feel," Felt said covering her face.

"Candidly, you probably don't need a bath quite as badly as they do," Subaru replied. He leaned over to Emilia. "I think Felt needs a break," Subaru whispered to Emilia.

She nodded.

"Hey Felt, we got a few hours to kill. What do you say we go and see Rom? Maybe he can fix us something to drink to perk us up again," Subaru suggested.

"Subaru, I don't know if even you are brave enough to drink with Gramps," Felt warned him.

"I'm not brave enough," He assured her. "Luckily, I am dumb enough."

Subaru gasped for breath. His head was spinning and the only reason that he hadn't already fallen over backwards was Emilia's grip on his arm. He didn't want to risk dislodging Beatrice who perched on his shoulder.

Everyone was laughing at him except for Emilia who had thought this was a terrible idea from the beginning. She struggled to keep her lover vertical.

"Thanks, Mili," Subaru wheezed.

Emilia looked at him in frustration as she pulled him in for a hug. "Alright, you drank 'Rom's special brew.' Do you feel like your manhood is proven yet?" She whispered in resignation.

"This wasn't about proving anything," Subaru whispered back. "Our friends just deserved a laugh after all they've been through this week."

Emilia furrowed her brow.

"Well you didn't pass out," Rom rumbled. "That alone puts you one up on most people."

"You did turn some funny colors though in fact," Beatrice smirked.

"Want another?" Felt said with a wolf grin.

"Felt, I know I said that I'm dumb but there is a limit," Subaru refused.

"You're welcome down here any time, Subaru," Rom said refilling the glass. "We'll have a drinking contest."

"Directly before my funeral I assume?" Subaru murmured.

Subaru and company left Rom's once Subaru was steady enough to walk without dropping Beatrice. At least Rom had remembered to feed them. The old man was actually a pretty good cook. They left the slums just as the sun was setting.

"Anyone need to do anything while we're in town?" Subaru asked.

"Actually," Reinhard said. "I do need to return to the Astrea manor for a time."

Subaru looked at him. "Are you sure?"

Reinhard nodded. "My oath to my lord has now been formally sworn. Father can no longer interfere with me. However I do need to go tidy up a few things with the family to ensure my attention is not divided in the future."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Well, if really you need to go there I'm not going to let you go alo-"

"Excuse me!" Felt interrupted.

Everyone started and looked at Felt.

"How many times did I give you a place to sleep?" She demanded of Reinhard.

"Quite a few," Reinhard allowed.

"And now you're going back to a home full of terrible people that you can't stand and you're not even offering to put me up for the night?" Felt asked.

Reinhard looked confused. "Well... as you say it is full of terrible people that I can't stand."

"Don't worry," Felt shrugged. "I'm good at dealing with terrible people. I'm probably better at it than you."

Reinhard face slowly brightened until he was beaming.

"Knock it off with the grin, Red. Let's just go," She said rolling her eyes.

"Yes, Miss Felt," Reinhard said leading the way.

"Felt?" Subaru called.

"What?"

"Remember to leave a few survivors to tell the tale!"

Subaru, Emilia and the spirits raced back to the hotel having been caught in a surprise down pour. By the time they got inside they were drowned.

After drying off, Subaru took Beatrice aside for their customary reading before bed.

"Aren't we reading early tonight, in fact?" Beatrice asked.

"Yes we are but the truth is after I bathe I think I'm going to be ready for bed. It's been a long day and I think it's going to be an early night all around," Subaru replied settling into bed with the book and wrapping an arm around Beatrice.

"Hm," Beatrice mused. "And Betty is going to be sleeping with her Bubby tonight, I suppose."

Subaru glanced at Beatrice and put the book down. "That's right. *Tonight* you will," He said calmly.

Beatrice appeared to be struggling with something. "Subaru, are you-"

"You know," Subaru interrupted, "Mili and I had a conversation about sleeping arrangements today."

"When did you do that, I suppose?"

"Oh, it was while Rom was proving that he could juggle you and Felt," Subaru replied.

"That man was rude in fact! And he smelled like vinegar!" Beatrice complained.

"Anyway," Subaru chuckled, "Emilia and I decided that we're fine having you and Puck sleep with us. Most nights anyway. Emilia and I are a couple now and we need our time alone just like Subaru and Betty or Betty and Puck need their own special time. So you and Puck are going to start sleeping with us regularly and every few nights we'll ask you two to sleep together instead. Sound fair?" Subaru asked gently.

Beatrice looked at Subaru for a long moment and then crossed her arms with a faint smile. "Betty can live with it, I suppose,"

Subaru smiled and hugged Beatrice. "I'm glad. So are we going to read this? I think it's your turn."

When Emilia emerged from her bath in her robe, Subaru was already sitting on the bed in his own robe.

Emilia took out a brush and began to fight through the wild tangles in her hair.

"The rain really messed up your hair, huh?" Subaru asked.

"Yes," Emilia said wincing as she tried to pull the brush through the matted tangles. "It's really snarly. Puck usually uses magic to fix my hair so I'm not very good at this. It actually kind of hurts to brush it tonight."

"Emilia, before we go to bed, do you think I could try something?" Subaru asked hesitantly.

"What?"

"Could I... Could I brush your hair?" Subaru asked.

Emilia looked at him in confusion. "You want to brush my hair?"

Subaru nodded. "It looks like it's hurting you. I'd just... I'd like to help."

Emilia hesitated then walked over to the bed and sat down in front of Subaru. She handed him the brush.

Emilia murmured, "You might have some trouble with it tonight because of all the snarls. I mean, I know you know about that we just discussed it but it's in pretty bad shape tonight and usually Puck uses magic to-"

"I'll be very very careful," Subaru promised.

She tilted her head back and Subaru began to brush out her hair with short careful strokes. Every time he found tangle or a snarl he worked at it patiently until it was gone. Emilia barely felt anything as he untangled the snarls.

Emilia laid further back until she was resting against Subaru's chest.

"Subaru, have you ever done this before?" She asked.

"No. Why? Does it hurt?"

Emilia shook her head. "No, it feels good."

Emilia swallowed hard and closed her eyes, giving up everything but the sensation of those strong hands working in her hair.

"Do you think that's good?" Subaru murmured.

Emilia opened her eyes and realized that Subaru was brushing her hair with long free strokes, having worked all the snarls out.

Emilia nodded and Subaru put the brush down in favor of wrapping his arms around her.

The two nestled together for a moment and Emilia raised her face for a deep slow kiss.

Subaru stroked her cheek. "Emilia are you... nervous?"

Emilia smiled at him. "No. Not at all actually. Are you?"

Subaru hesitated. "Yeah. I'm like really nervous!" He chuckled.

Emilia leaned in for another kiss. "Don't worry," Emilia whispered. "I'll catch you if you stumble," She promised.

Emilia smiled mischievously and waved a hand, magically making the lights go out. She kissed Subaru gently and guided him back to the pillows. They lay next to each other sharing soft, gentle kisses and teasing one another.

Subaru kissed her along her jaw and then drifted to kissing her neck. Emilia turned her head away to give him more room. She idly reached up to open Subaru's robe and then ran her fingers down his chest.

Subaru slipped Emilia's robe off her shoulders and began to kiss lower. Emilia gently took his face in her hands and drew him to her breast, cradling him against her as Subaru kissed and nuzzled.

Emilia raised Subaru's head to look at her. "Subaru," She urged in a whisper.

"Emilia..." Subaru asked nervously. "Are you-" Emilia met his lips in a gentle kiss that silenced his words. Gently she coaxed him closer. She was actually a bit nervous now. She could feel him pressing against her skin and Subaru was as big and strong as she'd thought he'd be. She worried it might be too big but right now Emilia felt warm and relaxed.

She was ready.

She urged him on with kisses and gentle words as she felt him pressing against her, into her.

Emilia let out a gasp as he slipped inside. Subaru kissed her and held her as she caught her breath. He waited until Emilia again urged him onward. She slipped her arms around him as he slipped deeper until Subaru slid into place deep inside her body and inside her heart.

Emilia sighed, wrapping herself around him. Subaru turned his head finding her neck and beginning to gently nibble.

They clung to each other unmoving; savoring this moment anticipated for so long.

They began slowly and gently; rocking against each other, cradling and stroking one another.

Emilia moaned and whispered, soft sounds that tantalized his ears and Subaru met her lips as if to devour them.

The rest of the world fell away and then there was nothing else but the sheer bliss of the moment.

Thanks for reading this. This ends what I think of as 'Arc 1' of this story. I have no immediate plans to continue but if people actually enjoyed it let me know and I might follow up on this. If this story continues then it will see Subaru and Emilia struggling to claim the throne as the Authority of Pride begins to grip more and more tightly on Subaru. Reinhard believes that his lord can wield this dark power to good causes, but it won't be as easy as he assumes. The Witchcult is currently hanging back because their Gospels assure them that the Archbishop of Pride has the situation under control, but that won't continue for much longer.

The other possible story (which I have no immediate plans to write) was to rework this concept so that rather than becoming best friends Subaru and Reinhard become respectful enemies. Reinhard can kill Subaru with a snap of his fingers but, due to Indomitable, Reinhard doesn't know that. Subaru constantly bluffs him to not attack because Subaru keeps telling him that a fight between the two of them could destroy the whole region. This would be a different story where Subaru is highly respected as the champion of the Emilia camp and everyone is in awe of his power (which they believe equals or exceeds Reinhard van Astrea) and only Subaru and Emilia know that their prospects for the throne are based on nothing more than a bluff. This story would have Subaru, Emilia, and maybe Felt running an elaborate con trying to fool the whole world when one mistake will bring it all crashing down.

Anyway, I'd love to get some reviews or feedback and I hope you enjoyed the story.

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 6**

Hey so I really wanted to thank everyone who wrote reviews. I never expected so many people to enjoy this story. Seriously, I published this almost as a joke and I assumed that if I checked back in six months maybe someone would have written: "It was OK but pretty boring." This is absolutely the most popular thing that I've published, which I'm sure says more about the fandom than it does about my writing style, but I'm very grateful nonetheless. Honestly I was so taken aback by the interest that this generated that I started to write arc 2 almost immediately.

So I did want to talk about some of the feedback that I got. People have suggested that they don't believe that Emilia would be so willing to jump into a sexual relationship this fast. I respectfully disagree. Remember that even when the real Emilia thought that kissing would lead to pregnancy, she was still convinced to do so very easily. We also know that the real Emilia is pretty casual about people seeing her naked (until Puck started to police it).

On top of that, this Emilia doesn't have sealed memories (a plot point that I never understood the purpose of). She doesn't have any reason to be especially hesitant about getting involved in a sexual relationship because she barely knows what it is. Subaru has decades of cultural training that lead him to approach a sexual situation with serious thought and weight. Emilia doesn't have any of that baggage so she's much more relaxed on their first night than Subaru is. Emilia has a simple perspective of "Couples in love have sex and we're in love so lets do that. It sounds very pleasant."

I also know that a lot of people think that everything was working out for Subaru just a little too easily... Actually Subaru's journey has been pretty smooth, hasn't it? It's kind of odd when you stop and think about it, right?

Anyway, I hope you all enjoy Arc 2. Leave a review! I adore reading them.

The next day, Subaru and Emilia got dressed and went to find the spirits.

Feeling entitled to a lazy morning, they asked the maids to bring them breakfast and the four spent their time lounging in bed while waiting for Reinhard and Felt to return.

Emilia was snuggling with Puck while Beatrice and Subaru took turns reading from their book.

It was Beatrice's turn to read, laying back against Subaru's chest with his arm wrapped around her. Beatrice was reading about a creature that could turn from human to mabeast when she sensed that her partner's attention had wandered. She glanced up and saw that Subaru was staring at Emilia with a huge smile. Emilia deliberately ignored Subaru's gaze and continued petting Puck but her face was bright red and she was smiling too.

Then Subaru and Emilia looked at each other for a moment and they both began to giggle.

Beatrice and Puck swapped a puzzled look.

Reinhard and Felt returned around lunch time.

"Any problems?" Subaru asked.

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Felt said with a laugh. "Heikel didn't have such a good night though."

Subaru stared at the smug-looking Felt, "...Details, Felt, details."

"Father was... rather offensive," Reinhard said, his face darkening. "He suggested that Miss Felt was a whore that I had brought home for the night."

"I feel like we're going to have to do something about that guy, sooner or later," Subaru grumbled.

"I took care of it sooner," Felt replied.

"Oh?"

"While Red was off taking care of something, Heikel tried to challenge me to a duel. He said that if I refused his challenge, Red would be publicly disgraced," Felt explained.

"I'm pretty sure that's not how it works," Subaru replied.

"It doesn't but I pretended to buy it. I had a plan. I tried to look weak and helpless; like I knew I was about to die and I had accepted the duel just to protect Red. Then I backed myself into a corner like I was just trying to die honorably

without shaming Reinhard," Felt said.

"This was a plan?" Subaru asked skeptically.

"Hell, yeah! Heikel didn't think I was a threat for a moment! He didn't even bother to draw his sword! He just walked over to me so that he could strangle me with his bare hands," Felt chuckled.

"Wait, he actually fell for that?" Subaru asked.

"I'm surprised that he would underestimate you so much," Emilia said.

"Don't be! Mili, men are always willing to believe two things about a woman: one, she is weak and two, she finds him attractive."

"Ouch," Subaru observed to Reinhard.

"What happened then?" Emilia demanded, her eyes wide.

"When he got close enough, I whipped out my knife and put it to his throat. Then I told him he could either surrender and admit that a dust rat had beaten him or he could bleed out all over the floor. Anyway, Heikel tried to order his men to help him but by then Red was back and he warned them that intervening in the duel was forbidden. Eventually, Heikel had to beg for mercy and I let him go. Even the servants at the Astrea estate looked at him like he was dog shit after that!" Felt laughed.

"He is shit!" Subaru agreed, "Nothing personal, Red. It's no reflection on you."

"No, it is not," Reinhard shook his head, his eyes dangerous, "I spoke to my father before he slunk off after that duel. I informed him that if he ever threatened Miss Felt again, or anyone else under my protection, he would face my blade and it would be no duel."

"I'm sorry, buddy," Subaru sympathized. "I know that's a shit situation to be in and it couldn't have been easy to say that to your father."

"No, it wasn't. But Father chose this battle, I did not," Reinhard said simply. "My lord commanded that no one should offer threat to Miss Felt, in peril of his wrath. I simply obeyed his orders. But even had you not spoken, I would never have permitted Father to harm Miss Felt. She has proved herself to be loyal, brave, and kind. I rank her far above my father in both character and nobility."

Felt turned bright red. "Oh, be quiet," She said, trying to hide her face. Felt coughed, "So, now that the whole city is talking about the Natsuki camp, what's next on our agenda, boss?"

Subaru smirked. "I thought that we'd go and visit Lady Crusch."

"Crusch, you didn't have to snap at them, nya," Felix chided gently after they had returned to Crusch's private apartment in the Karnstein mansion, "Your secretaries were only trying to help."

Crusch pinched the bridge of her nose with a sigh. *I am losing control here and that is unacceptable. It is beneath the dignity of a leader to take out her frustrations on her loyal followers.*

Gods, Felix and I were up almost all night talking, the poor boy. We spent the entire time trying to figure out how to recover from Subaru Natsuki's upset. He has changed the entire race by stealing my plan for the White Whale. What's worse is that despite talking strategy into the early morning hours, Felix and I accomplished nothing. Felix kept hinting that we were just talking in circles but I refused to accept that until it was nearly dawn. The truth is that the race has passed outside of my control at the moment and we are currently at a standstill.

I even began to wonder if my best choice might be to form an alliance with Priscilla and Anastasia to tear down Subaru Natsuki, who will shortly be the undisputed favorite to win the election. Working together, perhaps we could bring him down a bit. The three of us could break up the alliance and jockey for the lead once the race has evened out a little.

However, even that plan requires some kind of strategy for the three of us to execute. What could we, singularly or together, offer the people of Lagunica that would equal the killing of the White Whale? Negotiating peace with both Vollachia and Gusteko? But even if we succeeded at that pipe dream, if Subaru Natsuki slays the whale and then ends hunger and poverty in Lagunica, the game is over. Subaru will be carried to the throne by a thousand grateful peasants.

Gods, I hate this situation! My tactical instinct is telling me only one thing: the initiative has been handed to my opponent and right now all I can do is respond to his moves. My only choice at the moment is to watch and wait for an opportunity to turn the situation back to my favor.

I need either Subaru to make a mistake that I can capitalize on or I need a real disaster to occur. If the kingdom was to be in actual crisis and House Karnstein acts with its customary decisiveness to handle the matter, public opinion will swing back in my favor. Subaru's grand ideas might be impressive but a King who can not protect his people from danger is no kind of King at all.

Regardless, the reality remains that at the moment, there is little I can do but sit and wait and those are two things that I have never done well. My heart demands action. I need to find a way to shore up my support, even if in just a minor way, to avoid squandering this time on my hands.

Crusch sat down in a chair and ruminated on the situation. Felix was cleaning up the room around Crusch and putting away her freshly laundered clothes while Crusch gazed out the window and consciously tried not to scowl.

A knock came from the door.

Crusch frowned, *What's going on? My servants are all instructed to avoid my private quarters except in cases of extreme emergency. I insist on having at least one area in the mansion which is under my complete control. Can no one be trusted to do as they're told today?*

No, stop it, Crusch! Taking out your frustrations on the help is far beneath the dignity of your station. Just handle the situation.

"Enter," She called.

Jarvis, the chief butler, entered the room already bowing low, hoping to forestall his mistress's irritation, "A thousand pardons, Lady Karnstein, but there is someone here who wishes to speak with you."

"I ordered that my calendar be cleared for the day," She replied in a tone that was not quite a growl.

Is everyone other than Felix incompetent?! I was explicit in ordering that all my meetings and appointments be canceled today! What is going on? I've always run a tighter ship than this. I need to track down whichever secretary had failed at following basic instructions and reprimand them...

No, Crusch. That is your frustration talking. Your secretaries are all both talented and devoted to you. Mistakes will happen, even from the very best of servants, and it is the function of a leader to deal with those mistakes. So be it.

However, even with all that being the case, I have no appetite and no patience for mouthing polite formula phrases with some minor functionary or inquiring about the welfare of their relations whom I have never met.

"Please offer my personal apologies to whomever it is for the confusion but I am indisposed today and will be unable to meet with them," Crusch told the butler before turning back to her window.

"Forgive me, Lady Karnstein. I would have already done precisely that but I thought in this particular case your Grace might wish to make an exception," Jarvis replied, still bowing low.

Crusch looked at the butler in surprise. *Interesting. So I did make my wishes clear. My servants knew that I did not wish to be disturbed but this unexpected guest is of such exalted rank that they risked telling me anyway.*

"And with whom am I meeting?" She asked in a neutral voice.

"Lord Subaru Natsuki and Lady Emilia Natsuki wish to speak with you," Jarvis replied.

Crusch's eyes widened, *What is going on? Why? Have they come here just to mock and humiliate me for last night?*

No, that's unlikely. Subaru Natsuki did thoroughly embarrass Priscilla last night but that was just politics. He didn't stick around to rub her face in it, as Priscilla certainly would have done if their roles had been reversed. Subaru made his point and then continued on. He hadn't seemed to especially enjoy it.

Then why is he here? I may be in retreat but I'm far from being beaten. He couldn't really be so arrogant as to come here expecting my surrender could he? So what does he want?

"I will see them," Crusch told the butler. He whispered a command to a servant just outside who bustled off and then he began to close the doors.

"No, wait!" Crusch told Jarvis who hastily reopened the doors. "Don't take them to the council room. Tell them that I will see them here in my personal antechambers."

Jarvis nodded and closed the door, likely going off to try and catch up with the other servant.

Crusch steepled her fingers and stared at the wall, *What are you planning, Subaru Natsuki? You must have some idea to consolidate your gains from the upset you handed me last night, but what? Perhaps this time you've grown overambitious. By stretching your hand out so far to seize victory, you risk unbalancing yourself. Any advance a tactician makes, even if done from a superior position, always risks exposing them to counter attack. I will not underestimate you a second time, Subaru Natsuki.*

"Lord Subaru," Crusch said politely, "Welcome to my humble abode."

Crusch reclined in a comfortable chair in her own personal sitting room while Subaru, Emilia, and Felt sat on a nearby couch. Beatrice was on Subaru's lap. Reinhard sat in a chair nearby while Felix served tea. Crusch had changed out of her uniform and worn a simple but elegant dress, something which she rarely did.

I'm not comfortable outside my uniform but it might lead them to underestimate me and think of me as nothing more than a fainting flower of the court. This is a battlefield just like any other and I require the right tools for the challenge.

Felt is wearing low class clothes, she must be pretending to be nothing more than an ignorant commoner again for some reason. They couldn't really think that I would fall for it twice, would they? Or did she not have time to change before this meeting because she was busy doing something incognito earlier?

I also need to keep an eye on the little girl. She may look fragile but she's actually a Great Spirit, capable of destroying this entire compound without much effort. Did Subaru bring her here as a threat? No, probably not. Subaru already has Sir Reinhard here, that's threat enough.

"I appreciate you making the time to meet with us, Lady Crusch," Subaru said. "I was sorry that we didn't get a chance to speak yesterday but time got away from me. I'm also not insensitive to the considerable honor you've granted us. You don't permit many people into your private chambers."

Crusch stared at him for a moment, *What is that supposed to mean? Is it some kind of slur?*

I 'don't' let many people into my chambers?

Is he calling me frigid? Or is he being sarcastic and implying that I have taken a lover? Gods, why are the doings of a woman's bedchamber always fodder for public gossip?!

Crusch, stop it. It's most likely a meaningless pleasantry, at worst intended to demonstrate how much that he knows about the inner workings of your household. The fact that servants aren't permitted in these rooms isn't precisely secret but no one outside my own very well vetted household staff would know about it. For Subaru to be aware of this means that he has turned one of your most trusted servants against you: The spy. That is the most productive thing that I can be doing right now. I need to hunt down and eliminate the spy, or even better, turn them to my own use.

Perhaps that is the reason that Subaru came here. He wants to continue to lead you to overestimate him until you invest great meaning into every word he says, jumping at shadows and exhausting yourself. Clever bastard, I nearly fell into that trap of my own accord.

Well, two can play at that game. If he believes himself to be my superior then I shall encourage him to view me so. I'm glad that I took off my normal clothes and put on something softer. It was a shrewder gambit than I had guessed. Let him think that my sword is a prop and my uniform mere pageantry. An enemy who senses little threat from you is an enemy that you will catch napping.

"The honor is mine. I did not expect to be granted an audience with the front runner of the royal election so soon. I saw your interaction with Lady Priscilla yesterday. It was truly masterful game play," Crusch said.

"High praise indeed, coming from you, Lady Crusch," Subaru raised his teacup in a salute before tasting it. "Delicious," He said, putting down his cup.

Interesting, Crusch thought. My Divine Blessing assures me that he's lying. He can't stand the flavor of this tea. Most people think Bardock tea is the best strand in the region but apparently Subaru Natsuki has odd taste.

Subaru continued, "I've seen that you have quite the masterful strategic mind yourself."

"You are far too kind, Lord Subaru. All of my victories are the result of countless people, far more clever than I, working tirelessly toward the same goal. Truly, some days I feel entirely incidental to any achievement to which my name is ascribed," Crusch shrugged.

Subaru gave her a sly smile, "It would be the height of rudeness for me to call you a liar, Lady Crusch, so let me instead commend you for your exemplary humility."

Damn it, Crusch, you went too far! There is an artfulness to being humble. Overdo it and everyone can tell that it's fake. Mother was perfect at this but you take after your Father and always charge in proudly. I suspect that by the end of this little adventure, I'll wish that I had studied her example more closely.

"Well, perhaps, but it is also true that no woman stands alone. Numerous people worked on the speech I delivered at the presentation yesterday, for example," Crusch replied.

Subaru looked at her chidingly, "Forgive me, Lady Crusch, but you wrote that speech yourself."

Who is this spy?! I employ six different speech writers who all submitted proposals and they don't communicate with one another by my explicit design. How could the spy have possibly known that none of their speeches were selected and that I wrote my own? And why would Subaru just reveal that he possesses such high level access to my household and advisers over something so trivial? It sacrifices an advantage because now I'm on my guard. Does he mean to intimidate me? Is Subaru just taunting me with the depth of his intelligence network?

Still a sword cuts two ways. If he's truly this arrogant than perhaps I could drive him to boast.

"And would you please explain to me how you could possibly know that?" Crusch asked dismissively, sipping her tea.

"Your brilliant strategic mind is easily established by your bureau in the corner and that small piece of paper under that chair," Subaru said, unable to hide how pleased he was with himself.

Crusch quickly glanced at the bureau but noticed nothing unusual.

What is he babbling about? I see the piece of paper under the chair, probably a scrap from when I was taking notes for my speech. It's an annoying oversight but poor Felix is the only one allowed to clean up in here so mistakes like that will happen.

Still what is he talking about in regards to my 'strategic mind?' Does he think that I left the note out on purpose to do... what? And what does it have to do with my bureau? Is he noticing that most noblewomen eschew bureaus in favor of a

vanity table? What of it?

Never mind, let him keep talking. I should try to gain as much information as I can right now and then I can piece it all together at my leisure.

"I do not understand," Crusch replied.

"The paper contains the words 'for all Lagunicans," a phrase from your speech last night. The paper also has lines crossed out and corrections. It was notes for your speech," Subaru explained.

This man is dangerously observant but he's also overreaching himself with his deductions.

"I expect my chief speech writer must have dropped it there when we last discussed the matter," Crusch said carelessly as Felix scurried off to collect the note.

"Nope," Subaru replied.

"No...?" Crusch said, unable to completely keep the edge from her voice at being flatly contradicted.

"Your speech writer has never been in this room," Subaru replied.

"That is a very bold statement to make, would you please enlighten me as to how you are so sure of that?" Crusch asked, struggling to control her temper.

Who is this spy?!

"There are hairs on your bureau," Subaru replied with a smirk.

Crusch blinked.

"Specifically cat hairs that match Master Felix's," Subaru said.

"Of course. Felix is my trusted knight. He spends a great deal of time-" Crusch shrugged.

"The cat hairs are jammed into the drawer, caught between the drawer and the bureau's body. The only way that this would be possible would be if Felix was in that drawer. One or two drawers could be coincidence but Felix's hairs are stuck in all the drawers. The only logical conclusion is that Felix was putting your clothes away," Subaru explained.

Crusch noticed Felix fidgeting out of the corner of her eye. *Poor Felix, he has no idea what's going on. Actually, neither do I for that matter. Regardless he clearly thinks that his carelessness has put me in a bad situation, although he doesn't precisely understand how. I'll have to reassure him later.*

"But why is your chosen knight doing such a chore? You clearly have no shortage of servants in this mansion," Subaru continued, "The obvious inference is that you don't allow many people into this room, not even a trusted maid, so Felix is the one cleaning up after you and hence my earlier expressed appreciation of being permitted inside. This reduces the number of persons who could have written that note to just you and Felix. The words on the note slant to the right. Felix holds his teacup in his left hand and he also picked up that note in his left. You, on the other hand, hold your tea cup in your *right* and therefore you wrote the note. The note has your speech in the process of being written but it also has a curious code: E4E5Nf3Nf6Bb5Nc6. Whatever could that mean?"

"Do you really expect me to explain classified codes to you?" Crusch murmured with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"It's chess notation," Subaru explained, "You are such a chess fanatic that, even while you were working hard on your speech, when you needed to take a break you decided to play a game of chess in your head against yourself."

Subaru paused, "Also if you don't mind me pointing it out, I really would have gone with Bc4. Black was initially off balance and vulnerable to a sharp attack on the King's side. He might have pushed your offensive back but at the cost of valuable time to get his army moving while you took advantage of his poor position to activate all of your pieces."

Crusch just stared at Subaru, *Alright. Apparently Subaru Natsuki knows intimate details of my behavior in my private quarters. It is possible that he could be making up these 'brilliant deduction' in order to throw me off balance when in fact the spy spoon fed him all of this information.*

However, in order for the spy to have told him all this, it would mean that either Felix has betrayed me or that I have spawned a split personality that is determined to sabotage my own campaign. I'm not sure given the choice between the two which option is more probable.

That said, I'd take either of them over option three: What if there is no spy? What if there never was?

What if Subaru managed to deduce my plan for the whale simply from what Felt told him about our conversation? There might have been other clues that led him to the same conclusion as well but maybe there was no informant, it was all just pure deductive reasoning.

If that's true, then how can I possibly outmaneuver this man? The mind is always the sharpest weapon in your arsenal. As Father instructed, I've spent a lifetime training my mind to be as sharp as a razor. I've honed it to a perfect edge in conflict after conflict.

But what if I'm simply outmatched in this case? What if this is like when I played chess with Father as a girl and he would begin by taking the queen and both rooks off his side of the board just to make the contest fair?

If I can't outsmart Subaru then where does that leave me? Brute force? That's not a realistic option. Subaru has the Sword Saint defending him and he was able to overpower Priscilla besides. Making use of my long established network of beneficiaries and political allies might be a possible strategy but Subaru is making impressive gains among the nobility so that option also has poor prospects. Is this why he came here today? To prove to me that I'm simply outclassed?

I'm not done yet. There has to be a move to get me back into this game. I just need to find it.

"Excuse me, Lord Subaru," Crusch said in an annoyed sigh, "This has all been very entertaining but perhaps we could get down to business now."

"Of course, please excuse my digression. I was hoping that you might consider an alliance between our two factions in order to achieve a common goal," Subaru replied.

An alliance? Why? What could he possibly need help my with? Inroads with the nobility? Connections to the military? None of these seem terribly challenging for him to pursue on his own so I'm drawing a blank. Regardless, if he thinks he needs me for something it might give me leverage.

"A vague term, speak plainer," Crusch said.

"I want you to help me hunt down and kill the White Whale," Subaru replied.

Crusch's jaw dropped, This makes no sense! What could I possibly offer him that would assist him in slaying the beast? Reinhard can easily kill the whale all on his own. My army will be completely irrelevant to the hunt.

"I'm not sure that I understand, Lord Subaru," Crusch said slowly, "By alliance you mean..."

"By alliance, I mean an alliance. The Karnstein camp and the Natsuki camp will share credit for the kill," Subaru said.

This is a ridiculous offer! If anyone else suggested such a plan, I would assume that he were drunk. I'm receiving a healthy benefit to my faction: the credit for assisting in slaying the whale would put me comfortably in second place but all of this is done at no cost to me; as my army will simply stand by and watch the Sword Saint kill it! Is this some manner of bribe? Why? What does he want? Does he want to tether my camp to his own so tightly that I am later unable to break free and build my own support? That seems like a foolish strategy that has only the faintest chance of working anyway. Either Subaru is doing something profoundly stupid right now or something so ingenious that I am completely unable to figure it out!

"Lord Subaru, I don't see how this alliance benefits you," Crusch said bluntly.

"I'm attempting to form a reconciliation between our factions," Subaru replied.

Crusch stared at him, "You speak as though I were already defeated," She murmured.

"Just so," Subaru agreed pleasantly, "I will conquer this selection. I will win the throne for Emilia. My victory is *fait accompli*. There will obstacles and hurdles on the path and I will overcome them. That is simply how it shall be. Thus, I am less concerned with the selection itself than with my ability to form a functioning government afterward. The House of Karnstein has been a pillar of the kingdom for centuries and I require it to continue to be so. The best way for me to do that is to ensure that your faction and mine view each other as allies; hence my offer."

Crusch was momentarily struck speechless by Subaru's words and then her mind filled with flames, It's a very good thing that I'm wearing a dress right now. If I had my sword at my side it's quite likely that these words would have provoked me into doing something rash. And drawing my sword would indeed have been rash. The Sword Saint is sitting a foot away and my target disarmed Priscilla Barielle barehanded. I would die before I landed my first stroke.

Could he have been trying to provoke me with his words into doing something that reckless? Perhaps a way to kill me while claiming self-defense?

No, that's nonsense. He can clearly see that I am unarmed. Even if he did originally have such a strategy, he would have abandoned it as soon as he saw that I had no weapon. I need to stop looking for deep and nuanced meaning in the actions of this Subaru Natsuki. The answer is much simpler:

This man is insane. He is absolutely insane. Normally I would simply write off such words as he spoke to me as bluster from someone attempting to overplay his hand but my Divine Blessing didn't trigger; not once. He isn't lying, he genuinely believes himself to be invincible and that the contest is already decided in his favor. What kind of man is arrogant enough to believe that he can conquer an entire kingdom singlehandedly?

"I may not be quite prepared to accept your charity, my lord," Crusch said in a frigid tone.

"It's not charity. I'm appealing to your brilliant strategic mind," Subaru shrugged.

"How so?" Crusch grumbled.

Control your temper, Crusch. That teacup is fine china. If you squeeze it any harder, it will shatter.

"There are only two possibilities here, Lady Crusch" Subaru replied. "One is that I truly am the man that I purport myself to be. This would mean that victory shall inevitably be mine and all of your scheming and valor is vain."

Subaru let the words hang there for a moment and Crusch felt a chill run down her spine.

"Or?" She asked.

"Or I am a fool and my campaign will end the way of all foolish ventures: in fire. I will crash and burn out, leaving all of my supporters devastated, betrayed, and with nowhere to turn. Easy picking for whichever candidate has properly positioned herself to take advantage of it," Subaru mused.

Crusch's mouth went dry. He was right. If Subaru committed a serious blunder then Crusch would easily become the front runner using her own support and poaching some of his. His followers would almost certainly gravitate toward her after his failure if she had maintained a good relationship with them. But if he didn't crash out, if he didn't make that huge mistake...

Then she was defeated already.

"Regardless of which one you believe me to be, strategically speaking there is only one viable course here," Subaru said with a shrug.

My hand is forced, Crusch cursed herself.

"I would look most favorably upon such a joint venture, my lord," Crush almost growled.

Everyone was chatting in the carriage as they left Crush Karnstein's mansion.

"Boss, that was amazing!" Felt giggled, "Did you see the look on her face? You pinned her down and gave her nowhere to go but to accept. She even had to thank you for your offer!"

Subaru gave Felt a halfhearted smile.

"It is good to consider future alliances after the selection is over, but isn't this a tad premature, Subaru?" Reinhard mused, "I myself have no doubts as to your inevitable victory but already attempting to form a functioning government is thinking very far ahead."

"I agree, Subaru," Emilia worried, "Maybe this wasn't the right time to go after Lady Crusch this way..."

Subaru stared out the window for a long moment, "Well... Lady Crusch is in some ways our most dangerous opponent. She's a woman of considerable reputation and she's extremely popular among both the nobility and the military. If she takes the lead, we have a problem because she wants to end the pact with the dragon. That means that we can't negotiate with her to get the blood because she won't be able to get any more."

Subaru scratched his cheek, "Since she's so dangerous, we should keep her close... In this case, rather than give her the next few weeks to try and put her own initiatives into action, she's been forced to assist us in carrying out ours. She won't get much credit for that. We're stealing time and energy from her and she has no choice but to go along with it."

"Damn, boss! How do you do it?" Felt said in wonder, "Did you have this all planned out before you even spoke to Crusch?"

"Oh, no," Subaru laughed weakly, "I just had a vague idea when I went in and I followed the lead of chance from there."

"I think we can all trust that the odds will always be in your favor," Reinhard said proudly.

Subaru looked at him in confusion, *What does he mean by that?*

Beatrice was flipping through a book and Felt, Reinhard, and Emilia began to talk about the initiatives to empty the slums. This freed Subaru to think about what he really wanted to think about: how stupid he was.

Alright, well at least Felt and Reinhard bought that bullshit that I just fed them. They still think everything is going to plan. I sure wish I did.

How the fuck did I screw that meeting up so badly? Why did I do that? I went in there to offer Crusch a conciliatory hand and tell her that we might be rivals but still could be united in our goals to make the world a better place. I was also going to try and lay the groundwork to convince her to give me whatever blood the kingdom has left in exchange for bowing out of the contest if she ever does take the lead. Instead, I get swept up in Reason and Judgment's magical confidence and I spend the entire meeting showing off.

I played Sherlock Holmes in the meeting just to amuse myself. Oh and real nice job critiquing her chess move, by the way! How petty can you be? Honestly, I don't even know why I thought it was a bad move. I've played about ten games of chess in my entire life but Reason and Judgment took one look at the game and saw the mistake.

I rubbed Crusch's face in my superiority and I told her that she had no choice but to accept my offer.

Why did I do that?! She would have figured out that this was her only viable option on her own but instead I shoved it in her face. Now Crusch is furious at me and she feels humiliated by what I did. She might even feel a little bit afraid of me.

Good luck making friends with her now. She's cooperating with me because I gave her no other choice but she's going to be sorely tempted to stick a knife in my back if the opportunity ever presents itself.

How did I fuck this up so bad? It was Reason and Judgment. When I use it, I just want to give into it completely and keep using it. God, I've never done heroin but I doubt it feels much better than Reason and Judgment's magical

confidence does.

What a second, are you listening to yourself? You just compared this magic to heroin! Could there be a better signal that you need to stop using it?

Well..., or at least cut down a little. Restrict its usage to... emergencies, exigent circumstances, matters of import, that kind of thing. I mean, stopping cold turkey might be challenging so it really makes more sense to... taper off.

Come on, Subaru. You keep looking for evidence that Reason and Judgment is adversely affecting you, well here it is! You completely lost control of yourself during that meeting! I mean, Reason and Judgment has a point: you are heavily favored to win the selection right now but your victory is not guaranteed the way you implied while you were under Reason and Judgment's influence.

Your own overconfidence is dangerous. It's time to back off a little. You shouldn't need to use Reason and Judgment for anything over the next few weeks.

Focus on making a new machine. You're good at machines. You shouldn't need Reason and Judgment to figure out how to do that.

"Alright, so I have a really ambitious idea that I wanted to talk to you guys about. This machine could change the world!" Subaru proclaimed to his family.

Emilia was sitting on their bed with the two spirits laying against her. Emilia was attentive but Beatrice and Puck seemed almost half asleep.

"Huh," Subaru said, "I guess I was expecting a stronger reaction than that."

"I'm listening!" Emilia assured him.

"OK, so there was a thing back home that, if we could introduce, could make everyone's life infinitely better. It's called an engine."

"What does it do?" Emilia asked.

"Well basically it turns wheels for you," Subaru answered.

"It... turns wheels?"

"Yeah, you connect an engine to a wheel and it spins it for you," Subaru explained.

Emilia looked pained, "Subaru, I'm sure that you know what you're talking about, but that doesn't sound all that impressive to me. How would that change anything?"

Subaru chuckled. "Remember all the gears in my sewing machine?"

"Of course."

Subaru shrugged. "Those gears are all wheels but instead of having a person push the pedal to turn them, the engine does it for them. And that means that you can use gears to do all kinds of jobs, even jobs that a human isn't strong enough to do. You can use moving gears to make a device that cuts down trees. You can make wagons that don't require animals to pull them. At the moment people are heavily dependent on things like windmills and waterwheels or even animals to generate power. An engine let's you generate that same power anywhere. All kinds of tools that currently depend on people or animal power could be automated. There's no limit to what you can do what a device like that!"

Emilia's mouth hung open and even the spirits looked impressed.

"How do we make that, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"Well, that's the tricky part. The problem is, I think that we need to invent electricity first."

Beatrice cocked her head.

Subaru shrugged, "See, I wasn't really into cars back home and I don't have anything to work with in figuring out how an internal combustion engine works. Also, since I never took chemistry I have absolutely no idea where to start in order to make gasoline. But I did a few projects with electric motors in my gears and machinery class so if we can generate electricity I think that I can make one," Subaru explained.

Beatrice sighed, "Betty understood about one word out of three in that statement, in fact."

"OK, then let's boil this down to basics. Before we can make an engine, we'll need to figure out a magical way to generate electricity. Preferably some kind of magical electric battery," Subaru said.

He saw the blank looks on their faces. "Electricity is like... lightning. It's a weak form of lightening that you can use for... lots of things. So we need to try to figure out how to make a magic device that can generate that."

The blank looks remained.

Subaru sighed. "OK, it's like this..."

"...And that's called a circuit," Subaru sighed in exhaustion. He's been explaining this for close to an hour. Emilia still looked lost but Puck, who had played with magical lightning quite a bit seemed to be grasping the basic idea. Beatrice... was writing in a book.

"Beatrice? Are you taking notes?" Subaru asked.

"Of course Betty is taking notes, in fact. You have described knowledge that is not contained within Mother's library. This is unacceptable, in fact! Betty will learn all there is to know about the 'electricity' and then add the information to Mother's library, I suppose!"

Subaru nodded, walking over to Beatrice, "Good for you. Your mother clearly believed in gathering and preserving knowledge and now you're following in her footsteps. You know, I think your mother would be very proud of you."

Beatrice looked up, her eyes getting watery and Subaru pulled her into a tight hug.

"Actually, Subaru, I think I have an idea for something that might work," Puck mused, "There are a few types of magic crystals that can be charged with Air mana. They're sometimes called 'lightning stones' because if you hit them wrong they can erupt with energy. Once I threw some lightning at some naturally occurring ones."

"Do you often throw lightning at rocks?" Subaru asked.

Puck shrugged, "I'd been looking for Lia for centuries by then and I still couldn't find her so I was kind of annoyed."

Subaru wasn't sure what to say to that, "OK, what happened?"

"Well, the stones threw their own lightning back at me. I think maybe I made a 'circuit' or something like you described and unlocked the energy," Puck explained.

"Sounds awesome. Any idea how long the stones would work or how expensive it would be to make these things?" Subaru asked.

"No idea, Subaru. Sorry. But we can experiment to find out," Puck said.

"We sure can! You're the man, Puck! Paw Knuckles!" Subaru shouted, holding out his fist toward Puck.

Puck stared at Subaru's fist in confusion.

"I want you to slap my fist with your paw, Puck," Subaru whispered.

Puck didn't seem to get it but he obligingly slapped his paw down on Subaru's fist.

"Yeah! Paw Knuckles!" Subaru cheered, "That is totally going to be our thing!"

"Subaru, does 'our thing' really have to be *that* stupid?" Puck asked.

Subaru ignored that, "OK, people. Let's get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow we're going shopping for crystals and supplies and then we're going to spend a fun filled day doing arts and crafts with electricity. It sounds a lot less stressful than most of the other crap that we've been doing lately! Let's change the world!"

Emilia and Puck cheered while Beatrice just looked bemused.

That night, the spirits joined their contractors at bedtime.

Bedtime was seriously delayed as the spirits and contractors argued and haggled over who slept where so that everyone could each be next to their favorite people while still all fitting in the bed. Ultimately, Emilia proposed a compromise where Beatrice would cradle Puck and sleep in the middle.

Of course, this also led to Beatrice being read to before bed while Emilia and Puck listened. After Subaru finished his turn reading, rather than pass the book back to Beatrice, he offered Emilia a turn. She took the book and began reading out loud to everyone. Beatrice appeared to have misgivings about this at first but she quickly accepted it and her eyes grew heavy.

Emilia was almost done with her chapter when she realized that she was now reading to an audience of one.

Emilia put the book away and laid down staring at Subaru over Beatrice's head.

"You know, you're very good at reading stories," Subaru whispered.

"Well, I did read quite a few things to you when we first met so I've had lots of practice," She teased.

Subaru chuckled.

"These sleeping arrangements will certainly take some getting used to," Emilia admitted, "But it's nice. Not nicer than when it's just the two of us, of course. But nice all the same. It's like having a real family."

Emilia noticed that Subaru was staring at her.

"What?" She whispered.

Subaru rolled onto his back. "Mili, do you think someday- I mean a long, long time from now, you might want to start a family of our own?"

"A baby?" Emilia asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I mean we already survived one pregnancy scare so we're bound to be better at it now," Subaru mused.

Emilia grabbed her pillow and slammed it down on Subaru's face being careful not to wake the sleeping spirits.

Subaru giggled, "I'm just saying," He murmured from under the pillow, "I think that I might like a little Emilia one day."

"A little Emilia?"

"Oh yeah. I totally want a daughter. I want someone just her like mother. A little elf scamp charging around determined to rescue everyone else and take of her family. I can already picture her running all over the place, two Great Spirits constantly chasing after her and desperately trying to keep her out of trouble."

Emilia giggled and removed the pillow. She leaned over Subaru stroking his jaw. "It does sound nice," She admitted, "But I really want a little Subaru. Someone who can look at everyone else and convince them that everything will be OK, someone who will move mountains to help his friends."

"Hm," Subaru mused. "That actually does sound pretty neat. Why don't we just let fate decide one of these days?"

"Sounds good!" Emilia giggled.

She bent over to kiss Subaru goodnight and then snuggled into bed, Beatrice and Puck dreaming in between them.

The next morning, Emilia, Subaru, and the spirits were joined by Reinhard and Felt for breakfast.

After that, Felt went to the slums to start collecting information from the residents and Reinhard volunteered to accompany her. Roswaal had asked to speak to Emilia about an opportunity for the royal selection, so Subaru and Beatrice went out shopping alone.

"What are we looking for, I suppose?" Beatrice asked from her favorite seat on Subaru's shoulder.

"Oh, a few things, iron ore mostly. We'll probably need to use magic to shape it into wires ourselves. I doubt that people around here have much use for wire except maybe as jewelry. We'll also need to grab a selection of magic stones to experiment with," Subaru replied, scanning the market district.

Huh. OK, so where am I going? I haven't been in the market district since the day I met Emilia and I don't have the faintest idea of what I'm even looking for. What kind of store sells all that stuff? Hell, what kind of store sells any of that stuff? Where does a man go to buy ten pounds of crude iron? Are magic crystals jewelry supplies or magic supplies? And where would you buy either one?

I'm beginning to wish that I had asked Reinhard more questions before he disappeared this morning with Felt.

Subaru was wandering more or less aimlessly when he happened to notice an enormous store.

Well, that's pretty impressive. I mean, it's nothing compared to the malls and shopping centers back home but it's got to be three or four times the size of its neighbors.

Subaru read the letters on the front that said: "Hoshin Trading Company."

"This could be promising," Subaru mused to Beatrice.

"Promising how, in fact?"

"Well, we might not find what we're looking for but at least we could do a little reconnaissance on one of our rivals, right?"

"Betty supports whatever plan gets her back to her Bubby soonest, I suppose," Beatrice replied.

"I can get behind that idea," Subaru agreed.

Subaru walked into the store and a well-dressed demi-human with canine features approached him.

"May I help you, sir?" He said politely.

"I'm not sure. I'm in the market for a couple of pounds of iron ore and some magic gems," Subaru replied with a shrug.

The dog man stared at him.

"I'm not really sure where to shop for these and I figured this would be a good place to start," He continued.

"Alphonse, why don't you go and help Tivey in back. I'll assist this customer personally," A woman said.

Subaru glanced behind him and saw Anastasia approaching.

"Lady Anastasia," Subaru said with a deep bow.

Beatrice grumbled under her breath. Subaru bowing, when she sat on his shoulder, forced her to bow as well.

"Lord Subaru," Anastasia said with a formal curtsy, "What brings you to my humble shop?"

"Well, this may say something unpleasant about me but when you're in the market for quality goods why not start with the best shop in town?" He drawled.

"I love your attitude, Lord Subaru. Can I help you find anything?" Anastasia replied with a warm smile.

"Oh, just call me 'Subaru,' please. I'm just a customer here after all," Subaru smiled.

"Oh, but I always treat my customers like royalty. That's the secret to good business, you know," She replied.

"Oh, really? I'll have to remember that," Subaru replied.

"So what are you looking for today?" She asked.

"I'm actually in the market for some iron ore and a few different types of magic gems," Subaru replied.

"Really? What are you going to do with that?" Anastasia asked.

"It's for an experiment I'm working on. Kind of a device I'm building," Subaru replied, seeing no need to lie about it.

"Oh, like that sewing machine that I've heard so much about?" Anastasia said casually.

Well, we weren't really trying to keep it a secret but it's still pretty impressive that she heard about it. But if Anastasia wants to throw me off step she's going to have to work a lot harder. "Oh, you heard about that, did you? I'm impressed."

"I'm a trader, Lord Subaru. Information is my business. I've heard some very impressive things about it. If even half the stories are true, I think that this could be a very profitable development for you," She said.

"Oh, thank you very much."

"Oh, but listen to me!" She giggled, "I'm gossiping about your new projects in public like a foolish girl! Why don't we step back into my private office where we can speak more comfortably?"

"That sounds lovely, Lady Anastasia. Thank you."

OK, Subaru, for the record, you coming back into Anastasia's private office ranks among the single worst decisions that you have ever made in your entire life and I'm sure that Anastasia would agree. Although ironically, you can't really blame yourself for this mess. There was no way you could have known that in this tasteful but unassuming office, terror awaited you.

A terror named Mimi Pearlbaton.

"Again, my most sincere congratulations on your design. I have it on good authority that this new machine will completely revolutionize the textile industry," Anastasia said, her voice calm but her face noticeably pale as a whip made out of shadow energy smashed onto the floor with crushing force just to the right of where she was sitting, "I assume you're planning to manufacture them in quantity soon?"

"Soonish," Subaru said with a worried frown as a tiny cat demi-human climbed him like a tree, stood atop his head, and then leaped away with a giggle. "There are always production chain issues to resolve first," He shrugged.

"Oh, I do know what you mean. If you're ever looking for a distributor I'd be only too happy to assist," Anastasia said with a weak titter as a snarling Beatrice flew around her chair in hot pursuit.

"I may just take you up on that. The sales would help me finance a variety of other initiatives that I'm working on," Subaru said with a sigh as a mallet made of shadows narrowly missed pulverizing Mimi who leapt away grinning.

"I hope you wouldn't mind me taking a small cut," Anastasia said with a nervous cough as Mimi ran across her desk.

"Oh no, we both profit and our rivals grow weaker. Sounds like a winning strategy to me." Subaru mused, watching as Beatrice flung a barrage of shadowy spikes at Mimi. Mimi cartwheeled away as the spines embedded themselves in the wall like crystal porcupine quills.

"Hm. I knew that I was going to enjoy doing business with you." She said, jerking her head to the left as Mimi leaped by her, just barely missing Anastasia.

The two rivals continued their half hearted verbal fencing match with fake smiles that were noticeably sickly. The royal candidates looked at each other with a strange kind of sympathy. How had either of them allowed this situation to spiral so far out of control?

When they had first sat down, Mimi, a tiny cat demi-human with orange fur, was sitting in the room, calmly reading a book.

Beatrice was clearly bored by Subaru and Anastasia's conversation and she was flipping through the notebook that she had pulled out of thin air. When Mimi had come over to Subaru and asked if Beatrice wanted to play, Subaru had put Beatrice down beside her, pleased at the prospect. While their emotional ages were far apart, it might do Beatrice good to have some lighthearted fun from time to time. Besides, it was an opportunity for Beatrice to make some new friends outside 'the family.'

Unfortunately, Mimi's first idea for a game was 'I grab your notebook and keep it.' It took Beatrice a full three seconds of shock to even assimilate what had just happened. Then her face turned bright red and there was rolling fury in her eyes as she set off in hot pursuit.

The cat demi-human was running and bouncing all over the room while Beatrice flew after her and used a variety of spells to try and corner her quarry without damaging her precious notes.

God. Poor Anastasia looks sick to her stomach. She must be completely aware that Beako is a Great Spirit, fully capable of demolishing not only her store but the entire city block without much effort. If Beatrice were to really lose her temper, Anastasia's odds of survival are close to zero, not to mention the large fortune in goods and merchandise that she stands to lose and I have no means to remunerate her for.

I can survive Betty's temper-tantrum easily enough by triggering Indomitable but the damage to the city would kill any hopes we have for the selection, not to mention the sheer lost of life.

The only one in the room who seemed completely unaware of the stick of lit dynamite that she was playing with was Mimi Pearlbaton herself, who was having the time of her life leading Beatrice in a merry chase around and around the room.

The irony was that both Subaru and Anastasia secretly suspected the other of having staged this incident deliberately; hoping to force them to ask the other to put a stop to it and therefore securing a psychological advantage in the negotiation. Thus Subaru and Anastasia both found themselves trapped in a high stakes game of chicken that neither one actually wanted.

Finally, Subaru just couldn't take it anymore. "You know, one of the things that I've always admired about business is risk management," He said. It had the tone of a peace offering.

"Oh yes, I do so try to avoid unnecessary risk," Anastasia agreed earnestly.

Subaru looked at the two small ones running in circles around the desk, "On three?"

"One... two... three!" Subaru grabbed Beatrice and Anastasia snatched up Mimi. Anastasia immediately took the notebook away and handed it back to a livid Beatrice.

"Aw," Mimi pouted.

"You are rude, in fact!" Beatrice shouted, clutching her notebook.

"Ah. That's much better, don't you think?" Subaru asked with the smile of one who has escaped a narrow brush with death.

"Oh my, yes. That is a huge improvement," Anastasia agreed with a sigh.

Beatrice angrily opened her notebook again and buried her nose in it, settling in Subaru's lap. Mimi fussed for a moment and then asked permission to go out and play. Anastasia granted it and Mimi quickly ran out the door.

"I'm sorry, where were we?" Subaru asked with a sigh, "I feel like I was a bit... distracted."

Anastasia coughed, "Yes, we were talking about your sewing machine. It's a remarkable invention but I wonder if you have considered its impact on the market. It has the potential to put countless talented tailors out of work."

"Tailors are skilled craftsmen. Arguably, they're too talented to do nothing other than hem clothes all day. Machinery allows one man to do the work that previously required the efforts of many. This lowers prices and increases productivity providing a net boon to society. Therefore it should be society's responsibility, and the Crown's in particular, to ensure that workers displaced by such innovations are either properly assimilated into the new industrial paradigm or trained in new trades that allow them to sell their skilled labor for similar profits in new industries," Subaru replied.

I'm actually pretty proud of that speech. I spent days working on it. I was expecting someone to bring up the disruption to existing industries when I first broached the idea of the sewing machine but no one even mentioned it until Anastasia. I was starting to wonder if I had prepped this speech for nothing.

Anastasia considered his comments for a moment, "Fine words but that would be very expensive. How much are you prepared to spend on this initiative?"

Subaru was about to say 'whatever it costs,' before realizing that he was talking to a merchant and quickly rephrased: "No more than is necessary. True, it will be expensive but the surge in profits driven by the new sewing machine would also greatly enhance the Kingdom's tax revenue. What should the Crown do with this surplus? It would be ridiculous to compare a kingdom to a company, they play by very different rules-" Subaru said.

Anastasia's eyes narrowed.

Oh, she's probably wondering if that was an insult. Shit. I better try to be more diplomatic.

"However they do have a few things in common. A company that earns a profit but does not reinvest that profit in improving itself will soon find that its profits taper off. A kingdom behaves the same way. The money earned from the people needs to be reinvested in the people in a way that drives the cycle of increasing resources," Subaru finished.

Huh. This was actually a good idea. I'm talking to a merchant so if I describe everything in terms of profit and loss then I think that I can make a connection.

Anastasia was quiet for a long moment, mulling this over with a grave mien, "Interesting idea," She admitted, "I've been most intrigued in the potential opportunities created by your new sewing machine. Would I be correct in assuming that you're now working on a new device?"

Subaru saw no reason to deny it, "Yes. If my new device works it would be even more revolutionary than the sewing machine."

Anastasia drummed her fingers on the desk for a moment then broke into a broad smile, "Well, Lord Subaru, all I can say is that, regardless of who ends up on the throne, I foresee a very long and profitable business relationship for us!"

"I completely agree, Lady Anastasia," Subaru replied, "If you were the one chosen to rule, I'd be only too happy to negotiate to provide you, and Lagunica itself of course, exclusive rights to the license and distribution of all my inventions."

Anastasia's eyes glittered.

OK, if nothing else, Anastasia is the easiest candidate to talk to. There's no glad-handing, just tell her what you want and what you're offering and you can expect a negotiation. I think I'll keep my asking price vague for right now though. If she knows that I want the blood she might find a way to turn it against me. OK, so now that I've made basic investments in the possibility that I lose. Time to make the same investment in the case of victory.

"Also," Subaru continued, "If by some fluke, I was chosen to wear the crown, I hope that you'd be willing to consider a position on the royal council as an adviser in matters of trade and finance. I intend for my machines to change the world for the better. I think the Hoshin Trading Company has similar ambitions. It would greatly please me to increase your profits while I was saving the world. It strikes me as a win win."

"Lord Subaru, I think that we are going to be very close friends," Anastasia smiled.

Subaru suddenly had an idea, "Lady Anastasia, would you be offended if I made a naked attempt to buy your good will?" Subaru asked.

Anastasia tittered, "Oh, Lord Subaru, I am a merchant at heart. Everything about me is for sale."

OK, so do I just have a dirty mind or... You know what, I'm not going to think about it.

"You may be aware that the Nastuki camp is going to hunt down and kill the White Whale," Subaru said.

"I have heard. I am betting heavily on your success, Lord Subaru. The acclaim you win from such an exploit will be considerable."

"Would you like to share some of it?" Subaru asked.

"I'm not sure that I understand," Anastasia replied.

"The Natsuki camp will secure the kill and win our acclaim thereby. It occurs to me it might hearten the people of Lagunica to see the beast's head parade through the streets. The Hoshin trading company could easily transport the remains to the capitol. You also have a well established communications network to spread the word to merchants all over the continent of the victory over the beast, and your own contributions to that victory," Subaru suggested, "Similar to our discussion about the distribution of the sewing machine, I'm asking if you would care for a 'cut' of my achievement in exchange for your own services."

"Hm. Profit sharing on the level on an entire kingdom. An intriguing prospect," Anastasia mused.

"I like to think big," Subaru said modestly.

Anastasia mulled this over, "I think this is a very generous offer for you to share some of the credit for your extraordinary accomplishment. My goodwill could have been purchased much cheaper."

Subaru shrugged, "Hey, treat your business partners like royalty, right? Especially if they have fair odds of actually becoming royalty."

Anastasia laughed, "So I believe that early you were inquiring about iron ore and magic gems? How much were you looking to purchase?"

Hell if I know! I'm not even sure what these gems are called!

"Um, say twenty pounds of iron right now and one gem of each 'type?'" He guessed.

"I can provide that," Anastasia nodded, "I'll have it hand delivered to your suite by sundown."

Oh, so she knows where I sleep. Nice touch, Anastasia, Subaru thought.

"So that will be eighty gold," Anastasia said after a moment's thought.

"Impressive that you know the price of all your stock by heart," Subaru complimented.

I have no idea if she's scamming me but I'd guess probably not. She'll make much more money over the long term by playing me straight rather than picking up a few extra gold pieces now and proving that I can't trust her over a simple transaction. I'll double check the prices later.

Subaru looked down and noticed a few pieces of metal that looked like bolts lying across the floor. He picked them up. "Lady Anastasia, what are these?"

She glanced at them, "Oh, probably just garbage dislodged from the furniture by the children playing. They're trash," She said dismissively.

Beatrice's heel smashed into Subaru's thigh.

Oh boy. Beatrice just heard herself get called a 'child.' This particular Great Spirit's patience has been completely exhausted today. I need to remember to grab her some ice cream before we go home. Do they have ice cream here? I'm not sure. Well, I'll get her candy or a pastry or something.

"Lady Anastasia, do you have a large kite I can purchase?" Subaru asked, fingering the small metal rods.

"A kite? Of course. The best we have is one silver piece. I'll add it to your order. Are you planning to fly it with darling Beatrice?"

"Something like that," Subaru agreed, "Also can I keep these?" He held up the three small steel rods.

"Of course! That will be 2 silver please," Anastasia said with a smile.

Subaru scowled at her.

"Subaru, what are we doing out here?" Emilia asked as they stood out in the very blustery field. The night sky overhead was full of storm clouds and thunder rumbled ominously.

"We are performing an experiment that I read about in school. I think that everybody survived it," Subaru mused, tying the steel rods he had bought together with the kite string so that they'd hang parallel with the string.

"I just hope we don't get caught in the rain again," Emilia replied.

"I don't know. Frankly, I kind of liked brushing your hair," Subaru smiled.

Emilia blushed.

"Hey! That's my job!" Puck protested.

"Sorry, buddy! You were already asleep!" Subaru shrugged.

"Betty wants to know why we are doing this, I suppose," Beatrice grumbled

"Oh, it's part of our quest to master electricity," Subaru replied, picking up his massive kite, "Betty, can you bury the spool with the end of that string underground? We really don't want to have to hold it for this stunt."

Beatrice pointed downward and the nearly empty spool of wire leapt straight out of her hand and buried itself in the earth.

"That works," Subaru shrugged, "Here I go!"

Subaru started running and the kite easily got the intense breeze spiraling up into the air high above the trees.

"So... what do we do now, Subaru?" Puck asked, drifting over to perch on Subaru's shoulder.

"Now we wait for lightning to strike!" He cheered, walking back over to Emilia and Beatrice.

Puck grimaced, "Subaru, you *do* know that I could have just thrown a lightning bolt at those metal bits if you asked me to, right?"

"Sure, but what fun would that be?" Subaru laughed, wrapping an arm around Emilia's waist, "Now we get to spend some time outside together as a family! We're even flying a kite! This is awesome! It should be a memorable evening."

Puck sighed and flew from Subaru's shoulder down into Emilia's hands to be petted, "Lia, don't get me wrong, I really like Subaru, but do you think you could train him out of some of this weirdness?"

"Nope!" Emilia chirped, cuddling Puck.

"My family has become very strange lately," Puck mused as Subaru hoisted Beatrice up on his shoulder.

"Huh," Subaru replied, "You know, it's really weird now that you mention it but I feel like that 'lately' for your family

seems to corresponds to the exact point in time when I joined it. Eh, it's probably just a coincidence."

"If Betty is going to be stuck out here on this stormy night, Betty at least wants to know what we're doing, in fact," Beatrice said primly from Subaru's shoulder.

"OK, so we tied those steel rods to the kite string. The kite is the tallest thing around here so it should attract a lightning bolt. If I remember my science class, when lightning runs down the string and through those rods to reach the ground, it should magnetize the rods."

"Magnetize?" Beatrice asked.

Um. Beatrice called it something earlier. What was it? "Lodestones. It will make the rods into lodestones."

"Hm, interesting. Mother never knew that it was possible to *make* a lodestone, I suppose," Beatrice pulled her notebook out of thin air and started to take notes.

"I'm sorry, what's a lodestone?" Emilia asked.

"A lodestone is a rock that can pull other rocks to it, I suppose," Beatrice answered.

"Yeah, that's pretty close," Subaru agreed, looking up at the kite and the stormy clouds boiling overhead.

"Well, that sounds interesting but how does that help us make this 'engine' thing?" Emilia asked.

Subaru hesitated, "Um. I'll show you later. In this case, it's a lot easier to show you than to tell you."

Subaru looked out over the field, "Huh. Well, this I didn't expect."

Priscilla Barielle had gotten out of a carriage parked by the side of the road and was walking up the hill toward them in her elaborate red gown. Her attendant, Al, was carefully carrying a large umbrella over her head.

"My my," Priscilla drolled, "How amusing to find you out here."

"Good evening, Priscilla," Subaru said cheerfully, "I'm surprised that you needed the umbrella. I would have assumed that you would just rely on your luck to stay dry."

Priscilla flushed and scowled. She angrily gestured for Al to put the umbrella away.

Subaru, stop being an idiot! You want the other candidates to like you! You can't be certain that you'll win the selection and you might need to negotiate with them to get Emilia the blood. This 'scorched earth' strategy you're employing toward Priscilla is doing you absolutely no good.

"So what brings you out here on a night like this?" Subaru asked more conversationally.

"Oh, we were just passing by and I happened to see you all playing out in the field. I thought that, whatever this was, it would at least be *mildly* amusing," Priscilla answered.

"Probably. I'm usually pretty amusing. I like to think that it's one of my biggest selling points, personally," Subaru replied.

Priscilla frowned and seemed to be turning that statement over in her head looking for veiled jibs.

Oh, perfect. Priscilla dislikes you so much that she expects to find insults in perfectly bland conversation. You're really doing great here, Subaru.

Although, on the other hand, Priscilla was probably a lost cause from the get-go and deserves to be treated as such. I don't think that Priscilla would ever like me no matter how much I kissed her ass.

"Hm. So you're out here flying a kite? How delightfully pedestrian. Perhaps later you can all play hide and seek in the bushes," Priscilla barely hid her sneer, "I expect that's what elves and commoners do for fun anyway."

Puck growled and Subaru had to restrain himself from doing the same.

Wait! I can use this! Oh, man. If this works it will be awesome! "Oh, it's not a game, Priscilla. Actually, it's an experiment for a new kind of machine I'm working on. We're trying to confirm how long the kite can stay up there. It's a risky night to do it though, if we get unlucky lightning could hit the kite," Subaru worried.

Priscilla's grin grew vicious, "Oh my, yes. That would just be awful," Her voice positively reeked of false sympathy.

Subaru noticed Emilia looking confused from the corner of his eye. She turned to ask Subaru a question but before she could open her mouth, the mother of all lightning bolts flashed out of the sky and blasted the kite to pieces causing it to fall to earth in a shower of cinders.

"Oh dear! Your experiment is simply ruined! How dreadful!" Priscilla said, pressing both hands to her cheeks.

"Thank you, Priscilla! I guess 'luck' was with me tonight," Subaru smirked.

Priscilla looked confused.

This is awesome! I outplayed Priscilla and I didn't even need Reason and Judgment to do it! I don't need to be dependent on it, I can handle shit myself. I mean, I don't want to get too cocky. Priscilla isn't all that difficult to manipulate but still, it certainly puts a smile on my face.

"You see, we'd been standing out here for a good long while, waiting for lightning to strike the kite. I was worried we might be out here all night! But then you were kind enough to show up with your famous luck and I wondered: how can I turn *your* luck to my advantage?" Subaru mused rhetorically, "Oh, I know! I'll just tell you I don't want lightning to strike the kite and see what happens. Thanks a ton, Priscilla. You've been very helpful. I foresee a long and profitable working relationship for the two of us!"

Priscilla was bright red and breathing heavily. Her fist clenched tight around her fan.

Al leaned over and whispered something in her ear.

Priscilla glared at him then spun around and stormed back to the carriage with her nose in the air.

"You know, I really wouldn't keep provoking her," Al said conversationally, "Her luck always turns out badly for her enemies sooner or later. You may be on top right now but mark my words, by the end of the contest, Priscilla will be King of Lagunica."

"Whatever magic she possesses, Priscilla is still a bitch," Subaru told him flatly. "She belittles and mistreats anyone she views as less than her and that's ninety nine percent of the population. She views anyone not openly adoring her as an affront. In a perfect world, someone like that would never be trusted with *any* kind of authority, much less be made King."

"Well, you might be right but we don't live in a perfect world, do we?" Al said with no sign of offense.

"Not yet, but I'm just getting started," Subaru replied.

"Al!" Priscilla yelled from the carriage, "Why am I being made to wait for you?! Get down here this instant or you'll walk back!"

"Well, I better go," Al said with a yawn, "Nice talking to you."

"You too," Subaru agreed, watching the knight leisurely saunter back to the carriage.

Subaru glanced at Emilia, "That is one strange man."

Oh. Wait a second. I just had another bright idea. Um, I think.

Subaru slipped Beatrice off his shoulders, "Wait here, I'll be right back!" He said, racing down the hill toward the carriage.

"Hey! Priscilla!" He called as Al climbed inside.

Subaru rushed over to the carriage and hopped up on the side to peer through the open window.

Priscilla snorted, "Hm. What do *you* want?"

"You know, Priscilla, it occurs to me that we might be getting off on the wrong foot here," Subaru said, "To correct that, I figured I'd make you a peace offering."

Priscilla glowered at him but Subaru could tell that he'd peaked her interest, "After all this, you want to make *friends*? What could you possibly offer me?"

"The White Whale," He replied.

Priscilla's expression didn't change but Subaru could tell that he'd caught her undivided attention.

"It's the Natsuki camp's biggest prize. We're going to be heading off to hunt it down in a few days and I'm willing to cut you in on the victory."

"In exchange for what?" Priscilla asked suspiciously.

"Nothing. Like I said, it's a peace offering. I just want us to have a good relationship no matter who wins," Subaru shrugged.

"It's a good offer, Priscilla," Al commented.

She thought it over for a long moment then smiled smugly, "Well, I'm glad to see that you're finally accepting your place."

"Yeah, something like that," Subaru agreed, *God damn it, Priscilla. Do you absolutely have to be this difficult? Even when you're being given a valuable gift on a silver platter you still can't just accept it with good grace.*

"And what would you ask me to do in this hunt? I doubt you need any more military assets with the Sword Saint on hand," Priscilla commented.

"No, I think we're all set there. I've arranged for the beast to be dragged back to the capitol after it's dead and I

thought such a momentous event needed to be celebrated with suitable pomp and circumstance. I was originally thinking of holding a Triumph; that's a kind of parade and festival to celebrate great victories but I just don't have the skills or talent to plan one. But I realized that *you* could do that easily. You could arrange a festival and celebration that would be truly memorable to commemorate the occasion. You'd not only receive a share of the acclaim from killing the beast but you'd be the most visible participant of the Hunt to all of the civilians."

Priscilla mulled it over and then smirked, "Very well. I shall graciously accept your offer and stake it against your many insults against my magnificence. Keeping performing so well and I may yet forgive you."

"Sounds good, Priscilla!" Subaru said, barely able to keep from rolling his eyes.

Subaru hopped off the carriage and it trundled away.

Subaru walked back up the hill to where Emilia and the spirits waited humming to himself.

Hey, that meeting actually was lucky! That went freaking perfectly. By not using Reason and Judgment, I kept my ego in check and I'm managing to mend my bridges with the other candidates.

Suddenly he had an uncomfortable thought: *Subaru, are you sure you've thought this through? None of the candidates know that the others are participating in this. They might think that you've tricked them.*

Subaru shook his head, *Come on! Crusch doesn't know because I hadn't made any of the other arrangements yet when I talked to her. Anastasia doesn't know because it doesn't effect her, she's transporting a dead carcass; why does she even care who killed it or if there's a party afterward? And Priscilla doesn't know because she would have balked at getting 25% credit instead of 50% even though originally she would have gotten zero, so what right does she have to complain?*

Well yes, that's all very logical. But human nature is not logical...

Subaru scratched his chin. *Maybe I should tell Crusch at least. I doubt she'll really care but I should keep her informed if I really want to make friends with her.*

Subaru continued up the hill to reunite with his family.

The next morning, the four were sitting in their hotel room.

Oh my God, Beatrice and Mili are freaking adorable! They've been playing with these magnets for hours now! They're like children with a new toy! I wish that I had a camera but the charge on my phone ran out weeks ago. Huh. If I invent electricity here, maybe I could recharge it...

Beatrice and Emilia seem absolutely amazed that there's no mana at all in these magnets but they're still 'doing' stuff.

Huh, weird. They've really never encountered this phenomenon before. Since Beatrice knew what a 'lodestone' was I just assumed that magnets were relatively common here even if they were called by a different name but apparently lodestones are so rare that Beatrice only knows about them from books; she's never seen one.

I guess I always assumed that magnets were common in the ancient world. I mean, when was the compass invented? It seems like that would be a really old device but maybe it isn't? Come to think of it, how do you even make magnets anyway without duplicating that old Ben Franklin trick and that stunt dates to the 1700s, I think. When would the compass have been invented? Did old day sailors really have nothing to steer by but the sun and stars? That seems complicated. Damn, how did people find their way around in the old days?

Maybe I should add compasses to my list of inventions, or maybe people find their way around using magic here? I'll have to ask.

Subaru sat on the bed with Puck dozing on top of his head. Puck had initially been intrigued by the magnets but he'd grown bored quickly and settled in for a nap. Subaru was trying his best to draw designs for the needed parts for his engine in Beatrice's notebook without waking the sleeping spirit.

I can do this! I don't need Reason and Judgment for everything. This is just simple concepts they taught me in school. I'm no genius but I understand how magnets work. I just need to come up with a design to make a wheel turn using magnets and I'm all set.

"Subaru?" Emilia called, "This is really amazing but how do these things make an engine?"

"Hm?" Subaru asked glancing up. "Oh. Uh, Beako, can you conjure up some kind of wheel or something that would spin and let one of those magnets freely turn in a circle?"

Beatrice waved her hand and one of the magnetic rods was bound vertically to a wooden wheel on a shaft, lazily turning.

"Now you're each holding a magnet and you've been playing with them and you've realized that a magnet can either push or pull another magnet. So if the two of you move your magnets in sync, you'll be able to make the wheel turn around and around."

The girls obligingly tried but the wheel just rolled back and forth a bit while pointing vertically.

"OK," Subaru said, trying not to laugh. "Try it like this: Betty, first turn your magnet around."

Betty dig so and the wheel magnet spun until one pole was pointing at each girl.

"OK, now you need to move your magnets slowly and in sync. Emilia you're going to rotate your magnet *up* and Beako you're going to rotate your magnet *down*," Subaru said.

I wonder if this is what it feels like to teach a first grade science class. That actually might have been a lot of fun.

The girls starting turning the magnets in their hands and the wheel magnet obediently began to spin. It took them several tries to keep in sync but eventually the wheel was spinning freely and the girls were both giggling at their new toy.

"OK, that's the basics of how an engine works!" Subaru proclaimed.

"Subaru," Puck yawned from his perch atop Subaru's head, "I really don't mean to nitpick, but I feel like we've put a ton of effort into something that Betty could have done with her little finger."

Subaru laughed and gently plucked Puck off his head to cuddle and pet him, "Don't judge it yet, buddy. This is just a child's toy. Wait until you see it at full size."

Puck smiled enjoying Subaru's pampering.

"OK, Subaru, it's charged," Puck said, taking his paw off the small cylindrical crystal.

"Awesome! Paw Knuckles!" Subaru declared, extending his fist and Puck slapped it with a whoop.

"Puck, I thought you didn't like 'Paw Knuckles?'" Emilia asked.

"Meh, I'm starting to accept it," He shrugged.

"OK," Subaru said, "So now we have our magic crystal that will hopefully work as our battery. So now I take two iron wires and I touch them to each side of the crystal. Now when I touch the wires *together*, hopefully-"

There was a clap of thunder and Subaru was flung backwards in his chair, slamming into the floor.

"Whoa!" Subaru gasped.

Holy shit, did I just breathe out a puff of smoke? That can't be good right?

"Subaru! Are you OK?" Emilia gasped, looking down at him.

"Um. I think so? How do I look?"

"Your face is very dirty, in fact," Beatrice said critically, "But at least you still have your eyebrows, I suppose."

"We can be grateful for small miracles, I guess," Subaru muttered, climbing to his feet and picking up the chair.

"Subaru, was that supposed to happen?" Puck asked.

"Well... yeah kind of, I guess," Subaru replied, "I just wasn't expecting that strong of a reaction. I figured given the size of the crystal the best I could have hoped for was a tiny spark. I didn't realize how much of a charge you put in."

"Huh. Gee, Subaru, I really didn't put all that much into it. I could have put ten times the energy into this crystal without much effort," Puck mused.

"Good to know. OK, now that we know how strong the crystal is we won't treat it carelessly in the future," Subaru said, wiping soot off his face, "OK. Let's get back to business."

Emilia now looked uncertain about this idea but Beatrice who was sitting in her lap was riveted.

"So, we have an iron wire wrapped around our 'wheel magnet' which is now suspended between two other magnets. Now when I connect the ends of that wire to the two sides of this crystal, that should make the magnet spin," Subaru said.

He touched the wire to the sides of the crystal but the wheel didn't move. After a moment, Subaru switched the wires to opposite sides of the crystal and the wheel spun-

It spun exactly a quarter way around once and then froze in place oscillating back and forth.

Subaru frowned and switched then wires back again and the wheel returned to its original position.

Subaru clicked his tongue, "Huh."

"Now what?" Emilia asked.

"Um... Well, I'm not totally sure. I need to think about this," Subaru admitted.

"Betty thought that you'd seen a machine like this before, in fact!" Beatrice complained.

"Hey! You've seen an earth dragon before, does that mean you could build one from spare parts? It's going to take a little experimentation, Beako," Subaru grumbled.

OK, great. Now what? I guess this was always the flaw in your thinking. Emilia and Beatrice had trouble making the wheel spin with their magnets and that was using human minds to try and keep it in sync. Are you really going to find a way to do that with gears?

OK, think. People did this using the exact same tools you have. Actually the crystal is a lot better than the tools they had. There is no reason you can't figure this out.

Using Reason and Judgment would probably make this entire process trivial...

No! I need to stop using that so much! It's starting to affect me even when I'm not using it. Reason and Judgment needs to be saved for emergencies.

This may not be an emergency but it would still be a good investment. After all, figure this engine out once and you can reproduce it forever. Besides your family is counting on you. They're all sitting here waiting for you to figure it out. How long will you make them sit there and wait? You don't want to disappoint your family. You certainly don't want to look dumb in front of Emilia...

OK! OK, fine. ONE more time. This is a good investment after all and I don't want everybody to be sitting here waiting for me to figure it out. I'll just use it for a minute but after that I am serious about cutting down. Nothing that feels this good can be healthy... well except maybe for Emilia's kisses. The point is that I don't really know what it's doing to me and it's clearly making me act erratically. So after this I need to draw a line in the sand and cut back. Deal?

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and the world froze around him.

Subaru felt the confidence envelope him like a warm bath and his intelligence surged.

Really, Subaru, you're making too big a deal out of this, He thought to himself. Sure, you acted badly in front of Crusch but can you really blame Reason and Judgment for that? It didn't make you do anything that you really didn't want to do. You just stopped thinking about the consequences. It was your fault, not Reason and Judgment's. Your intelligence is vastly enhanced in this place. Have you ever noticed that while you're in here and possess much more precise thinking, you have never once worried if Reason and Judgment was having an adverse effect on you? You should consider what that means.

You have no evidence that Reason and Judgment is doing anything to you. None at all. You've never worried about the long term consequences of using Indomitable. So why are you so flustered by Reason and Judgment whenever you are not using it?

It's because when using Reason and Judgment, you rely on pure reason and in the outside world you are guided by fear. You don't understand this magic and so you are afraid of it. This is an irrational response that will uselessly and pointlessly cripple you. Respecting the potential consequences of something you don't fully understand is wisdom, assuming that there are terrible consequences without evidence is paranoia.

Well, hopefully you'll be thinking more clearly now when you return to the outside world but regardless you have a task to perform.

Subaru willed himself to return to that long ago gears and robotics class and in moments he found himself there again. Every detail was perfectly preserved for him, down to every hair and grain of dirt on his classmates bodies. Subaru briefly recalled that the memory of his home and parents had been badly blurred and wondered why that wasn't the case here. He quickly dismissed the line of thought as irrelevant at the moment.

The gears and machinery class in fifth grade. This was your favorite class ever. Your one and only 'A+.' Mom and Dad were so proud of you, they thought they had a burgeoning engineer on their hands for a while. You were the class star here.

The rush of emotion Subaru felt began to break through *Reason and Judgment's* powerful calm.

God, I wish I could have taken this class every year. Imagine how different things could have been if I'd had an outlet. If I'd had a place like this where I felt like I had a talent, or even a passion. My whole life might have been different.

Look at all those faces in class. I remember every one of them.

Oh damn, that's Koushiro! I haven't thought about him in years. We were tight this year, always together.

His arm is in a cast. Oh yeah, I remember that he had a very bad break while skateboarding, his arm was in that ridiculously heavy cast for months...

Wait a minute. That cast... That isn't a skateboarding injury. That cast is designed to try to stop the arm from rotating. Koushiro is dealing with a spiral fracture. That's not caused by an impact with the ground it's caused by some force twisting an arm until it breaks!

How did nobody notice? How could any doctor in his right mind ever set a spiral fracture in a child without demanding answers from the parents? Did he just not care?

All those bruises and funny injuries on Koushiro over the years and I never knew, I never even suspected. He'd always laugh them off claiming he was just clumsy. Koushiro was always the class clown, cracking jokes and making everyone

laugh. We never even guessed that he could be having problems at home.

Then again I was the same way; always cracking jokes, doing stunts, making everyone laugh. No one ever guessed that I was in pain. Koushiro never asked me and it never even occurred to me to ask him...

What happened to Koushiro? School ended for summer recess and I never saw him again. I always assumed that he'd just moved away but maybe...

How much did I miss? How much pain and suffering in the people close to me was I completely oblivious to because I was so totally fixated on my own?

Subaru felt overwhelmed by guilt and when *Reason and Judgment's* magical calm engulfed him again, he did not try to resist it.

Whatever happened to Koushiro, it's too late to help him now. Regardless of how much you regret failing to notice and failing to help him, the only choice is to move on. You must focus on the future, on all the people you can still save or you'll be doomed to regret your choices time and time again.

Subaru sighed and turned his mind back to the matter at hand. Subaru studied the electric engine, not the child's toy young Subaru was laboriously constructing at his own desk but the commercial one on display on the teacher's desk.

Hm. Interesting. Instead of a rod spinning in the middle it's a series of wires. How does that... Oh I see. Actually, that's rather brilliant. If you put a current through a metal wire it becomes an electromagnet. I remember learning that in this class. The energy from the battery flows into those 'brushes' on the side or whatever they're called and they only make contact with a single set of wires at any given time. So as the wheel turns, the set of wires that the current is flowing through changes and the poles keep aligning in order to keep the wheel turning rather than getting stuck like mine did. I'm guessing those curved plates on either side of the wheel are magnetized as well. That's another good notion. By making the magnets shaped like that, the force pushing against the rotating magnetic field is constant instead of dropping off as the wheel moves. I'm guessing those curved plates are set up so that the entire side is a magnetic pole. OK, I get this now. It'll take Beatrice and Puck some effort but I think we can make this work fairly quickly.

Subaru left *Reason and Judgment*.

"OK!" Subaru clapped his hands together, "I know how to make this work!"

"Betty thought you said it would take experimentation, in fact?" Beatrice said.

"Eh, we're better than experimentation. Let's just do this!"

Alright, this seems good. We've reshaped the iron into wires and we've threaded all those wires around and through the wheel so that no two wires touch each other. We've increased the size of the wheel itself to make it easier for us to work on it. The wheel wires all terminate at a small metal end point that looks like a solid piece but it's actually glass linking twelve different sets of metal wires together. That means that the wires coming from the crystal will only ever touch a single set of the wires threading the wheel at any one time. We've also swapped out the side magnets for curved steel plates that I magnetized by running a current through them.

Oh and most importantly, most importantly, we created a cradle for the crystal to rest in that connects it to the wires. Yeah, I learned the hard way that grabbing hot electrified wires during these experiments is no bargain.

OK, so... I think we're all set. I also connected some blades to the wheel just for a demonstration so now I think I'm ready to test this world's first electric fan!

Emilia sat on the bed across the room while the spirits and Subaru had finished their project.

"OK, let's do this!" Subaru cheered slipping the crystal into place.

The wheel started to turn and kept turning. It quickly got up to an impressive speed and began to blow a column of air straight across the room.

"Alright, we did it!" Subaru cheered, hugging Beatrice. "Paw Knuckles!" He shouted at Puck who slapped him five.

"Subaru!" Emilia yelled.

Subaru looked up and realized that the wind he had created was aimed straight at Emilia. She had her eyes shut tight and her hair was streaming straight back as her clothes billowed all around her, "What are you doing?!" She cried.

"Oops," Subaru muttered.

The door opened and Felt walked in, "Hey, boss, I just wanted to-

Felt froze in place and her jaw dropped as she took in the scene. Subaru and the spirits were working on an odd device that seemed to be conjuring some kind of enormous wind that was hard at work trying to either blow Emilia out the window or strip her naked.

"Hi, Felt," Subaru said awkwardly.

"Boss, are you in the middle of some kind of dark magic ritual?" Felt asked matter-of-fact, "Because I can come back later if you're busy."

"Oh no, Felt," Subaru disagreed, "We're all friends here so we're perfectly comfortable performing dark magic in front of you."

"Subaru!" Emilia cried.

Subaru was back in his selection announcement finery and so was Emilia. The spirits had been given the night off and were curled up in bed after being read to.

"Do you think you're ready?" Emilia asked.

"Oh, for Roswaal's intimate little ball with only about three hundred guests that we need to glad-hand? Sure, why not?" Subaru replied.

Emilia reached out and straightened his shirt, "Come on, Subaru. You yourself said this was a good idea."

"It is a good idea," Subaru agreed, "It's just not a very fun idea. If I wasn't walking into that ball room with the most beautiful woman in the world on my arm, I think I'd be quite depressed right now," Subaru extended his arm to Emilia.

"Subaru," Emilia shook her head with a fond smile. She wrapped her arm around his. "Come on, let's get going. Reinhard and Felt are already down there with Roswaal."

"Shit!" Subaru said in mock horror, "They're outnumbered! That gaggle of noble peacocks will eat them alive! To the rescue!" He shouted.

With a smile on her face, Emilia gently slapped Subaru's chest as they went down to the ball together.

Oh boy, somebody shoot me, Subaru thought.

"Baron! Lovely to see you tonight," Subaru said with a broad smile. The baron was an old bald man with a monocle. He was dressed in an elaborate military uniform.

Nice looking uniform, I must admit. I wonder if it, or the baron, have ever actually seen combat.

"Wonderful to see you, Lord Subaru. The entire south reach is very excited about your new crop initiatives. I was wondering if you might have time to explain some of these new agricultural strategies to some of my neighbors, perhaps next month?"

"I'm sure we can arrange something," Subaru said with a smile.

God! I can't smile much longer. My face aches!

"Marvelous!" The baron leaned in to whisper to Subaru, "I must tell you, strictly in confidence, that your actions at the presentation ceremony the other day attracted a great deal of favorable attention to you. My neighbors are cautious by nature but I have it on very good authority that if are able to slay the whale, whole duchies are prepared to openly announce their support for your candidacy to the throne."

"That is truly marvelous news, Baron," Subaru whispered back, "Rest assured that no word of this shall escape my lips."

"Capital, my good fellow, capital. Excuse me, I need to speak to my good neighbor the duke," The baron said, marching away.

Subaru sighed but then noticed that nobody was waiting to talk to him, *Thank God, I can finally get a break. Three hours of small talk and pointless formalities! Do people really consider this fun?!*

Subaru glanced around the ballroom and spotted Emilia standing next to Roswaal also unoccupied.

OK, this is the first moment I've had all night where nobody was standing in line waiting to talk to me. I am going to use it to talk with Emilia. Off I go!

Subaru struggled to walk with the correct formal gait and not simply scurry across the floor and attempt to avoid anyone noticing him.

Emilia noticed him approaching, "Subaru," She said, not quite able to smile.

She must be as exhausted as I am. I should run interference tonight and try to talk with more of these weirdos so she can rest.

"Excuse me, Lord Subaru but I must speak to the Corlis family on a matter of some important, would you kindly watch over the Lady Emilia for me?" Roswaal said, walking away.

Subaru approached Emilia and gave her a very formal bow much to her confusion.

"Forgive me, my lady. I realize that this is extremely forward of me but I was struck by your radiant beauty from across the room and I knew that I would simply die if I was forced to spent another moment outside of your divine company. Would you possibly consider favoring me with your conversation?" Subaru said.

"Subaru!" Emilia whispered in reproach, trying not to laugh.

"Ah! You know my name! And yet I feel now as though I have never heard it before! It could never sound so perfect coming from any other lips!" Subaru faked a swoon.

"Subaru, knock it off!" Emilia told him not very sternly. She took his arm and glanced around to make sure no one had noticed their playing.

"How are you holding up?" Subaru asked, dropping the act.

"Fine, I suppose. Roswaal was just talking to me about... well, it's not important. I'm pretty tired though. I can't wait for this to be over," She replied listlessly.

"I hear you. I've done nothing but talk to people for three hours straight. I'm up to almost a hundred nobles that I've had to converse with. We're getting a lot of promises of support but man are these discussions painful," Subaru sighed. "How many are you up to?"

Emilia glanced away, "I... haven't really been keeping track..." She sighed.

"Well, the ball is almost over. We can go up soon," Subaru reassured her.

"Yeah," She nodded.

Damn, Emilia looks exhausted. And miserable. Maybe I can help her relax a little bit.

"Actually, you know what?" Subaru said, "Why don't you just go up now? You look really tired. I can handle the room until we close up. Why don't you just call it a night?"

Emilia glanced away for a moment, "Don't you... need me to help?" She asked quietly.

"Nah, I can handle it on my own! Why don't you just head up and relax. You've earned it," Subaru replied.

Emilia looked at Subaru somberly for a moment and then nodded with a sigh, walking out of the ball room.

Alright, I need to keep an eye on the crowd in case anyone tries to chat Emilia up for a few last minutes of pleasantries before she can make her escape but it looks like nobody is noticing her leaving so I don't need to head anyone off.

Oh crap. Another group of nobles headed right toward me. Forty minutes and counting until the time Roswaal paid for to use this ballroom elapses and the hotel staff kicks everyone out.

When Subaru came back upstairs, Emilia was on the balcony in her nightgown, looking pensively out over the city.

"Hey, Mili," Subaru said cheerfully.

Emilia didn't look up.

Subaru frowned, "Is there something on your mind?" He asked, walking out on the balcony.

Emilia sighed, the night wind tussling her silver hair. "I don't know," She admitted, "Maybe I'm just tired."

"It's been a pretty long couple of weeks," Subaru agreed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and gazing out at the city below.

"But how long will it go on for?" She asked.

"What do you mean?" Subaru said.

Emilia sighed, "What happens after we heal the forest? I mean... I guess I never really thought that much about what would happen afterward. I knew that I had to get the Dragon's blood in order to save my people and if that meant becoming King then... that was just what I had to do."

"Mhmm," Subaru encouraged her to keep talking.

"I need to get the blood. I have to. But this... this... I don't know if this is the life that I want for myself," Emilia sighed, rubbing her forehead.

"What kind of life do you think you *do* want?"

She sighed, "I guess... I always dreamed that after the forest was healed, I'd just go back there and live with my people," Emilia said, "I never thought too much about what being King would actually mean. It's not something I could just walk away from, is it?"

"Well, abdication is a possibility, but on the whole you're right. It is a huge responsibility," Subaru admitted.

They were both silent for a moment.

Subaru rubbed her shoulders, "If you could pick your world, any world imaginable, what would it be like?"

Emilia smiled sadly, "I think I'd like to just go back and live in the forest with everyone. And with you, of course," She added.

"Well, that does sound like it could be nice," Subaru agreed.

"The forest is beautiful in spring time," She murmured as Subaru wrapped his arms around her, "I thought maybe we could make a little house, just for the two of us. I used to mine crystals out of the earth and trade them to humans for the things I needed. It was hard work but I did alright. Maybe we could even... start a little family of our own some day," She whispered with a blush.

"Sounds wonderful," Subaru whispered into her hair.

"I... never wanted a life among the nobility. I'm not sure that I'll ever feel really comfortable here," Emilia admitted.

"Emilia," Subaru urged.

She looked at him.

"What do *you* want?" Subaru said, "That is my only concern. What kind of life, what kind of world would make you smile the most often?"

"Subaru," Emilia chuckled, "We can't change the whole world to suit us."

"Says who?" Subaru objected, "We absolutely can build the world according to our designs. I believe that now more than ever."

Emilia just stared at him.

"Emilia," Subaru said, taking her hand, "Tell me what you need to be happy. I'll bring it to you all tied up in a bow," He promised.

Emilia shook her head with a smile, "Subaru, you're so silly."

"You're what matters to me, Mili," Subaru asserted, "If you don't want to rule this land, then just tell me that and I'll see to it. We'll come in first place by the end of the selection and our price for capitulation to the runner up will be the Dragon blood. Then we can go anywhere you want. Do anything you want."

"Subaru," She whispered in wonder. Then she shook her head. "Wait, what about the agricultural reforms?"

"Oh, that will spread like wildfire anyway. We don't really need to sit around and supervise it," Subaru shrugged.

"What about the people suffering in the slums?" Emili asked.

"What about them?" Subaru replied, "I mean sure, we failed to end the cycle of poverty and deprivation, like so many thousands of idealistic reformers before us. Felt will certainly be disappointed but I doubt she'll be all that surprised. At least we got *her* out of the slums. That's something."

Emilia looked pensively at the city spread out before her.

"Fixing the world is a huge task, Mili," Subaru mused, "If you think that you don't want to shoulder this burden, there's no shame in that. Most people wouldn't want to shoulder it either."

Emilia gave Subaru a sour look, "And then what?"

"Hm?"

"If we don't do something about this then who will?" She demanded.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think that if we don't at least *try* to fix these problems then no one will! That's what I think!" Emilia snapped.

"You're probably right," Subaru agreed.

"So how can we just walk away?" Emilia demanded, "How can I just go back to the forest and tell everyone here: 'This isn't my problem so I'm going to ignore it?' What do I say to Felt whose friends stay stuck in the slums or Petra who's struggling to have enough to eat in winter? 'Sorry, I just wanted to rest and relax instead of helping you?'"

"Well, you do make a valid point," He admitted, scratching his ear thoughtfully, "I guess I'd feel pretty guilty just leaving all of our friends in the lurch like that."

"Then we have to do something or at least try to! We can't just run away, we have an obligation to all of the people who dared to believe that we would help them!"

"Gee, Mili, I suppose you're right," Subaru replied calmly. "We do have to do something to help them."

Emilia stared at him for a long moment and then she bowed her head against the balcony railing with sigh. "Subaru, have you been manipulating me in this conversation?"

"No, ma'am," Subaru said seriously. "You did a fine job doing that all on your own without any help from me."

Emilia laughed, "You knew I wasn't really going to walk away and ignore all this from the start, didn't you?"

"Sorry, Mili," Subaru said sympathetically, "But when you get right down to it you're pretty much the best person I know. The words 'It's not my problem' are literally not in your vocabulary."

Emilia shook her head ruefully. "I guess you're right. But it was a beautiful dream wasn't it?"

"It won't always be a dream, Mili," Subaru replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I won't act like being King is just a job. It's not. It will be stressful and demanding and it will eat up a big chunk of our lives. But that doesn't mean it gets to eat up *all* of our lives. We still have obligations to each other and ourselves that need to be met. One obligation that we owe to the people is to take good enough care of ourselves that their rulers don't have a nervous breakdown and snap from the stress!"

Emilia laughed.

"Besides, we could achieve *all* of our goals without ever reaching the throne, and that option is something that we should consider carefully. We can negotiate with the other candidates for the dragon blood. We can create a movement to achieve demi-human equality from down in the trenches with the people already fighting for reform. We can easily spread advanced agricultural techniques through the world. The slums can be emptied by a combination of public and private investment if we lead the charge.

"Emilia, it's not just a question of *if* we'll do something about all these problems or not; you will absolutely do something. That's who you are and I'd expect no less from you. The real question is about what we'll give and how much. Giving anything at all puts you way above all the people out there who simply don't give a damn. That doesn't mean you need to surrender your entire life to a cause," Subaru explained.

Emilia looked at him thoughtfully.

"Even if we do decide to take the throne, we'll manage our schedules. There will definitely be a lot of work and it will sometimes be very difficult. But we'll make certain to always budget special time for us, and for Puck and Beatrice, and for little Emilia too," Subaru said with a smile.

Emilia laughed and shook her head, "Subaru, we are absolutely not calling our daughter 'Emilia!' Do you have any idea how confusing that would be?"

"That's the whole point!" Subaru said, catching Emilia in a hug, "You know that I'm just not brave enough to scold *you* so when you make me upset I'll just scold our daughter! It's brilliant, I tell you, brilliant!"

Emilia laughed hitting Subaru in the chest. "Subaru! You are awful!"

"But you love me anyway," Subaru smirked, hugging her tighter.

Emilia smirked up at Subaru and wrapped her arms around his neck, "You know that I do," She whispered, pulling him in for a kiss.

Emilia was packing.

"Emilia, couldn't this just wait until after we deal with the White Whale? That should only take a week or two and then we could all go together," Subaru complained.

"Roswaal has been trying to gather all the village chiefs and minor nobles from his domain to hear about the crop rotations and this was the only time that he could schedule it," Emilia shrugged.

"They're village chiefs and minor nobles!" Subaru snorted, "What the hell is eating up all their time? I'm sure Roswaal could arrange another get together next month."

"Roswaal also pointed out that it would do us some good if I did a little campaigning on my own. It helps enhance our appeal since it shows that we're two different candidates working together. I don't want to just be... 'Mrs. Natsuki.'" Emilia continued with a sigh.

Subaru looked hurt, "What do you mean by that?"

"I just think it would help our image if we worked independently for a week or two," Emilia explained.

"Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?" Subaru asked.

"No! I just- We might as well handle both tasks at the same time," Emilia shrugged.

"I'm not crazy about this, Mili," He grumbled, "I think it would be just as well for us to hunt down then whale first and then do this later."

Emilia frowned, "What's the matter, Subaru? You don't think I can do this?"

"No! Of course, you can do this! It's just," Subaru sighed, "I really don't like being separated from you," He admitted.

"I don't either," Emilia admitted, "But this might be good for us."

Subaru frowned, "How can being apart for weeks be good for us? It makes me unhappy. I'm assuming it makes you unhappy too."

"Of course, it does!" Emilia snapped, throwing more clothes into her suitcase, "But that doesn't mean that I shouldn't go off and do things on my own!"

"No, it doesn't," Subaru agreed, "But this is a *long* separation that I don't think we really need to endure. Besides, whenever possible I always thought it would always be better if we handled things as a team."

"And what does that mean to you?" Emilia snapped.

"Huh?"

"Does it mean that just I sit there and watch you do everything?" She grumbled.

"Mili, what are you talking about?" Subaru asked.

Emilia shook her head, "Subaru, you dummy," She growled.

Emilia folded her arms and sat down on the bed, looking away from Subaru with a scowl.

"Emilia, why are you so angry about this?" He asked.

"You don't think I can do this on my own, do you?" Emilia asked.

"That is *not* true," Subaru said.

Emilia glared at him, "You don't understand how I feel at all about this at all, do you?"

Subaru opened his mouth and then closed it again.

He sighed, "I guess that maybe I don't," He admitted, sitting down next to her, "But I'd like to. Do you think that maybe you could explain it to me?" He asked gently.

Emilia glanced at him and sighed. The anger seemed to melt out of her, "It's just... I want... I *need* to be more than just Subaru Natsuki's wife. I'm proud to be the person you love, Subaru. It makes me happy... it makes me happy in a way that I never thought I could feel. But... a wife needs to be... more than just... a pet."

Subaru took Emilia's hand, "I'm listening," He assured her, "I hear you. I'm not sure that I understand yet but I know that something is bothering you and I want to help. So please keep talking and I'll try to understand."

Emilia sighed, "We met because you were helping me find my stolen insignia. Then you saved my life from Elsa and... you almost died while saving me."

"Not my finest moment," Subaru quipped.

"Shut up, Subaru," Emilia snapped.

"Yes, Mili," Subaru said more seriously.

"Then you risked your life saving the entire village of Arlem!" Emilia said.

Subaru was a little shamefaced, "I'm sorry, Emilia but I really don't get the problem. I think you need to spell this one out for me."

Emilia buried her face in her hands and shook her head with a sigh, "Subaru, you dummy. I'm saying what have *I* done?! This is *my* quest that we're on. We're trying to save *my* people. But what have I contributed to saving them? You've been the one doing all of the work!" She cried in exasperation.

Subaru blinked, "But... I mean that never bothered me. I *like* doing things for you. I don't care what you've done, I just want you to love me. The way I love you."

Emilia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, "Subaru," She said calmly taking his hands, "Imagine for a moment that our roles were reversed. Imagine if it was *your* family we were trying to save and everything that I had done was specifically done to help you. Imagine if I had been the one who had accomplished everything to take us this far and you were just baggage along for the ride. Imagine that everyone in the kingdom was backing me for the throne and that people were only speaking to you at all because you were my husband. How would *you* feel about *yourself*?"

Subaru flushed guiltily, "Not... great, I guess," He admitted.

Emilia nodded, "And I don't want to feel 'not great' about myself. I don't want to be a wife who needs to be taken care of. I want you to know that I can always be there to help carry the load. I don't want to be *part* of the load that you're carrying. I want prove that I can stand beside you as a full partner."

"Emilia, you never need to prove anything to me!" Subaru swore.

She smiled sadly, "Maybe I need to prove it to myself." She paused, "Saving the forest is my quest. You're here because you're helping me to atone for my mistake. And I'm grateful for everything that you've done for me, Subaru, I am *truly* grateful. But if you do all the work and I don't contribute anything at all toward saving the elves, then in what way did I

atone? First I fail my people and then someone *else* saves them. If I don't contribute anything on my own then I've just been luggage on this mission. How could I respect myself after that?"

Subaru hesitated and then nodded with a sigh, "OK. I understand now. I do. You need to take some time and take care of this. I get it," He hesitated, "But it's only *me* you need to do this without right?"

"What do you mean?"

Subaru shook his head, "Emilia, would you please do one thing to make me feel better while you're gone?"

Emilia's eyes narrowed suspiciously, "What?"

"Take Felt with you," He said.

"Felt? Why?" Emilia said in surprise.

"I just don't want you going into anything alone," Subaru shrugged.

"Subaru, I won't be alone. I'll have Puck with me, and Roswaal, Ram, and Rem," She pointed out.

"OK, first of all, I think Ram would slit your throat if Roswaal asked her to and Rem would look the other way while she did if Ram said so. Roswaal is out for his own best interest which may or may not line up with yours.

"Puck is awesome. I love Puck and if you get into a fight with somebody, you and Puck will make that dope very very sorry they ever came up with the idea. However, you don't have anyone with you to talk things over with. If an opportunity comes up while you're doing this, who will you discuss it with? Puck would do anything for you but he's not terribly perceptive about whether an opportunity is good or bad. He'll just tell you to do what you want. Felt can always see the angles and you know that she's solidly on your side. She'll just be another pair of eyes for you to use on the trip," Subaru explained.

"So why aren't *you* taking her with you then?" Emilia said in a curt voice.

"I'm doing the exact same thing! I'm taking Reinhard and Beatrice whale hunting. Reinhard is the ultimate warrior but he's not the sharpest sword in the armory so Beatrice can be my second pair of eyes and help me deal with non combat problems. I'm not asking you to do anything that I'm not doing. I just don't like anyone in our group going off alone without proper support. Hell, I don't even let Reinhard go off alone if I can help it! I always pair him up with Felt,"

Subaru took a deep breath, "Listen, Mili, this isn't because I don't trust you or because I don't think that you can handle yourself. I'm just trying to make sure that we're *both* equipped to handle any surprises that might come up while we're separated."

Emilia digested that for a moment, "But what about her work in the slums?"

"Actually, I asked Felt to recruit Rom to keep it up while she's gone. It gives me an excuse to give him some money," Subaru smirked.

"Why are you so sure that Felt will even agree to come with me?"

Subaru looked uncomfortable, "It's just possible that I broached the subject with her last night..."

Subaru coughed, "Um, Mili? You're... squeezing my hands really tight right now..."

Emilia glared at him, "Why would you go behind my back about this!"

Subaru blinked, "I didn't! I'm talking to you about it right now!"

Emilia sighed and shook her head ruefully, "Alright, fine. I guess that's fair. If it will make you worry less, I'll take Felt with me," Emilia said tweaking his nose with a smile.

"Thank you, Emilia. I owe you one," Subaru replied.

"Yes, you do and I plan to collect!" She said with a smirk.

"Oh, boy. Now I'm scared," Subaru said.

Emilia laughed.

The door opened and Ram entered, "Miss Emilia, the carriage has arrived."

Ram bowed and then left.

"Well, I guess I need to go," Emilia whispered, giving Subaru a long deep kiss.

"I'll walk you out," He said, grabbing her suitcase in one hand and taking Emilia's hand in his other.

"So I'll see you at the manor after you and Reinhard kill the whale?" Emilia asked.

"That's the plan. Shouldn't be more than a week or two. Then we can all come back to the capitol together for Priscilla's party. Also, while you're at the manor, please keep the front door open," Subaru replied.

"The front door?" Emilia asked.

"After a week or two with no Puck, I'm afraid Beatrice could be so desperate to be reunited that she might break it down!" Subaru replied.

Emilia laughed.

***Chapter 7*: Chapter 7**

The enormous, flying whale fell to the earth with a crash like thunder.

Crusch's army, which had been standing at a safe distance, finally moved. They swarmed the lifeless beast, getting it ready to ship back to Lagunica for a public showing.

"Huh. So that was it, I guess?" Subaru said to no one in particular. Beatrice sat on his shoulder while Crusch stood nearby with her arms crossed, "It just seems like kind of an anti-climax, doesn't it? I mean, we spend more than a week chasing this thing down, we finally catch up to it, Reinhard swings his sword once, and that's all she wrote."

I remember that Felt once told me that I had no idea how powerful Red really was. Clearly she knew what she was talking about.

Crusch didn't immediately answer.

Yup, a little over a week in constant close contact with me and she hasn't thawed even a little. I tried to be respectful and pour on the charm but Crusch was having none of it!

Crusch murmured, "I suspect that my men are disappointed to be honest. Most of them wanted to help to defeat the beast themselves. Many of them had lost friends and family to the beast's deprivations over the years."

"I think we can deal with their frustration," Subaru replied, "I'm pretty sure that soothing their irritation is easier than the two of us spending the next few weeks writing apology letters to wives and parents about why their loved ones needed to die so that we could kill this thing," Subaru replied, shifting Beatrice to be more comfortable on his shoulder.

"Hm," Crusch replied.

Over the past week I've learned that 'Hm' is about as close as Crusch ever gets to admitting when she agrees with me.

"That is a very big fish, I suppose," Beatrice commented, looking at the colossal whale's corpse.

"Actually it's a mammal," Subaru corrected.

"Hm!" Beatrice stuck her nose in the air, "Betty was trying to tell Subaru a joke, in fact! But only Subaru gets to be witty and facetious, I suppose!"

"Sorry, Beako," Subaru replied, trying not to laugh.

"The beast is dead, Lord Subaru," Reinhard said, returning to Crusch's command tent.

"Awesome job, buddy. You're the whole reason that nobody got hurt on this hunt. Those soldiers owe you their lives," Subaru told him.

Reinhard shrugged, "I'm just glad to have been of service, my Lord."

"Buddy, you are always of service," Subaru laughed. He paused, "Was that a compliment? It was supposed to be a compliment but now that I've said it out loud I don't know if it actually was. Any thoughts?"

"I shall take it as a compliment, my friend," Reinhard said, hiding his laughter.

"Wonderful," Subaru replied.

Subaru turned back to Crusch who was watching the companions interact with boredom. "Alright, Crusch, I guess we'll get out of your hair then," Subaru told her, "Anastasia's forces should be here soon to help you ship the whale's head to the capitol. It should be a remarkable celebration. Everyone is going to be excited to see us."

"Hm," Crusch grunted.

Well, at the very least Crusch seems to be happier about my presence now that she knows it's about to be removed. What was that old insult? 'Nothing improves your company like the absence of it?' Guessing that's how Crusch feels about me.

Alright, I've been trying to fix our relationship and win her over for almost two weeks straight. I give up.

"Well, it was fun working with you, Crusch," Subaru sighed, "I'll see you back in town and I hope we have the opportunity to work together again."

"Hm," Crusch replied.

Hey, how about that? I suggested working together in the future and she didn't say 'no way in hell.' She even gave me a

'Hm.' Maybe she is warming up to me!

Either that or I'm kidding myself because I am completely desperate for approval at this point.

Felix approached Crusch as Subaru left.

"Crusch, you need to get ready to address the men, nya," Felix murmured. Felix hesitated and then spoke unusually sharply to his beloved mistress, "And, Crusch, stop scowling all the time for the Gods' sake, nya! The men are starting to notice!"

Crusch grimaced and attempted to clear her mind.

Name of the Gods, I'm exhausted. Felix and I have been watching Subaru Natsuki like a hawk for nearly two weeks and all I've seen is a biddable simpleton. Where is the arrogant genius that I met before? Does Subaru have a twin brother, perhaps? What is he playing at? If Felix and I hadn't been at that meeting ourselves, I would have sworn that whoever reported the inhuman powers of observation and deduction possessed by Subaru Natsuki was an inveterate liar!

Was this some twisted game he was playing with me for his own amusement? Why?

"Have the men fall in," Crusch instructed, smoothing her brow by sheer force of will, "I will address them."

Subaru gathered his few belongs and left the tent that he, Reinhard, and Beatrice had been assigned.

Subaru walked through the camp with Beatrice on his shoulder while Reinhard was helping Crusch's troops dismember the Whale's corpse.

I know that Red is Red but I really want someone to explain to me how you can fillet a giant fish with a sword and make a sound like bombs are being detonated.

"Lord Subaru!" A tall man with gray hair who was dressed in full armor called.

"Hello, Captain Falric," Subaru said.

His eyes widened, "I am... surprised that you remember me, my lord."

Huh. We've spent a decent amount of time together over the past two weeks. Most of the time Beako, Reinhard, and I were either marching with Captain Marwain's troops or Captain Falric's. Why does he think that I wouldn't remember him? Shit, he must have seen all the clowning around I was doing to try and thaw Crusch. No wonder he thinks I'm dumb.

"Of course, I do," Subaru said with a weak smile, "I'm actually glad to see you before we leave. I wanted to wish safe travels home to you and your men," Subaru leaned in to whisper to Falric, "Don't tell anyone I told you this but I have it on very good authority that there will be one hell of a party waiting for you and your troops when you get back to the capitol."

Falric smiled, "I look forward to it, my lord. But you are departing? You are not returning to the capitol with us?"

"No, we need to make a side trip first, then we'll head back to the city and join you. We're heading up north to meet up with a beautiful elven princess and a magic flying cat," Subaru explained.

Captain Falric stared at him.

Huh. Now that I've said that out loud, I guess it does sound kind of strange. When did saying things like this become normal for me?

I suppose I can't really blame Falric for looking confused.

"Well, if you are departing then allow me to wish you safe travels, Lord Subaru," Falric said, extending his hand.

"Thank you," Subaru said, shaking it warmly.

This is nice. At least someone in Crusch's army likes me. Two weeks of having to deal with Crusch's frozen demeanor, and Felix, who was only willing to talk to Reinhard, have left me burned out.

"And may I just say on a personal note, sir, you were truly a pleasure to have along on this hunt," Falric said, "The troops and I think quite highly of you. Your remarkable confidence and good humor during the long march and the hunt for this terrifying beast were inspirational. Every man here would be proud to serve alongside you in a campaign again, my lord."

Wait, really? What the hell did I do? I mean... just not bitch constantly? I know that I never complained about anything because Crusch was always watching and I knew I couldn't let her see me whine.

Actually yeah, that's probably exactly it. I'm a noble. Or at least, that's how the troops see me. The soldiers are probably used to nobles coming along with them for a lark or for bragging rights so that they can at least claim that they once saw combat. Those nobles are probably people who get fussy if they're forced to skip their bubble bath for the day. That isn't exactly a tough standard to beat.

Still at least someone out here likes me.

"I'm truly moved, Captain Falric," Subaru said earnestly, "Although, I'd be happier if none of us ever had to serve in a campaign again."

"As you say, my lord," Falric agreed smiling, "But such a world is a long way off."

"Not so far off, Captain. A better world is coming, on a quiet day I can hear her breathing." Subaru said, walking off with a smile.

That's a good line. It just popped into my head at the perfect time to use it. I didn't even have to use Reason and Judgment.

Shit, who said that? Where do I know that line from? Is it from a movie? Maybe Martin Luther King said it?

Ugh. That's going to drive me crazy now. I could probably remember if I used Reason and- No! Stop using that so much! It's not critically important to satisfy your curiosity about some dumb line. It's just annoying that you can't remember!

Man, I really fucking miss Google.

Subaru helped Beatrice up into the earth-dragon drawn wagon and then climbed up beside her.

OK, so important travel tip: When going somewhere way out in the country, always ask the question: "How am I going to get back?"

I guess I just assumed that Reinhard had thought ahead and made preparations for our transportation. I need to remember to tell Felt that. 'Yes, Felt, I actually assumed that Reinhard had thought ahead.' She'll think this was hilarious.

At least I was able to buy this wagon and the earth dragon off a teamster who can hitch a ride back to the capitol with his buddies. I paid him at least twice what it's worth but it's better than walking all the way back to the manor.

Live and learn, I guess.

"Have you got everything?" He asked Beatrice.

"What could Betty have possibly left behind, I suppose?"

"I guess it was a silly question," He admitted, "Now we're just waiting on Red."

"Subaru!" Reinhard said, running up to the wagon.

"What's up, Red?" Subaru asked, "You ready to go?"

"I've received dire news, my friend. The Black Serpent is attacking the northern part of Lagunica near the Elier forest. The sages' council requests that I go there immediately to face the beast. I'll need to get you and Miss Beatrice somewhere safe quickly."

"We'll be fine, Reinhard. Just go! People need you," Subaru told him.

Reinhard seemed doubtful.

"Beatrice and I can handle ourselves and we can find the way to Arlem from here. It's basically just following the main road across the plain back up into Mathers territory. Come and meet us at the manor when you're done with the snake," Subaru told him.

Reinhard nodded and dashed away.

"And Reinhard!" He called.

"Subaru?"

"Be careful! I know that you're well nigh invincible but the snake is dangerous and you're all alone. Watch yourself," Subaru told him.

Reinhard nodded and sped away in a blur.

Beatrice sniffed dismissively, "Will it take us long to get home, in fact? Betty misses her Bubby."

"And Subaru misses his Mili, but we'll see them pretty soon and then we can both catch up on our cuddling," Subaru replied, driving the earth dragon forward.

The ride through the wide open Lifaus plain was actually very pleasant.

Wow. It's like a whole ocean of grass as far as the eye can see. This is pretty nice. This trip might be the most relaxed I've been since I got to this world. I feel like I've been running around all day everyday for over a month. Now I just need to sit here and periodically remind the earth dragon to stay on the road. This is wonderful.

You know, Emilia and I really need to take a vacation or something. Maybe just a weekend away. Just Emilia, me, and the spirits. Maybe we could rent a little cottage someplace and just play house for a couple of days. It sounds like heaven.

I wonder how Emilia's meeting with Roswaal's people went? Well, I mean, I'm sure that the meeting itself went fine but is she feeling any better? She was pretty upset when she left and I never even realized that she feeling so insecure about herself until she spelled it out for me. Great partner I am, my fiancée is feeling miserable and I never even noticed.

Well, if she did win a lot of new support, maybe that will make her feel better about herself.

Yeah, maybe but the truth is even if did win over a bunch of people, I doubt it made her feel any better. I'm worried that, given her mood right now, no matter what she does, she's just going to feel like she's following my lead so she doesn't deserve any of the credit for her own accomplishments. I need to think of a way to let her take the lead for a while.

Yeah that's a good idea. It might really make her feel more confident in herself if I followed the trail she blazes for a change. And that's obviously a good thing... I mean, it's not like she might develop new confidence in herself and then realize that she just doesn't need me anymore... right?

Subaru noticed something far off in the distance.

"Wow. Hey, Beako! Check out that tree!" Subaru said, pointing off in the distance.

Beatrice looked up from her notebook, "Hm. That's the Flugel Tree, I suppose. Betty has read a great deal about it."

"Bet all the books in the world don't compare with actually seeing the damn thing though," Subaru mused, "God, look at the size of it! That thing is like a skyscraper."

Beatrice stared at the massive tree for a moment. Its branches shaded miles of the plain, "Betty is glad she saw it, I suppose. The Sage Flugel planted that tree four hundred years ago. Mother knew Flugel."

"He was a friend of hers?" Subaru asked.

"...Mother knew Flugel," Beatrice repeated quietly.

Subaru glanced at Beatrice who seemed unusually somber and decided to not to press the issue, "Do you think we should stop and take a closer look?"

Beatrice shook her head, "We should keep going, I suppose. Betty just wants to be with her Bubby."

"Yeah, I guess thoughts of Emilia are motivating me to head home right now too," Subaru agreed as they slowly drove by the tree.

The tree was so big that it took them close to an hour to put it behind them.

Subaru glanced at Beatrice who was sketching something in her notebook.

"Hey, Beako, what are you working on?"

"I'm designing one of those dragonless carriages Subaru spoke of, I suppose." Beatrice said proudly.

"Really? Can I see it?" Subaru said with interest.

"I suppose," Beatrice handed it to Subaru with evident pride.

Subaru studied the notebook for a moment.

Oh boy. Don't laugh, Subaru! Don't you dare laugh! Oh, this is so freaking cute, it's like a little kid's concept. Beako designed a wagon with an engine alright, she's designed a wagon with FOUR engines, one for each wheel. The cargo space is about eighty percent taken up by engines that she's stacked on top of each other. This is adorable.

OK, get a grip Subaru! Beako worked hard on this and she deserves to be encouraged!

"This is great, Beako!" Subaru complimented her, "This is a perfect first draft. This will be really useful to use when we start to refine our designs."

"What do you mean by 'first draft,' I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"Well, when you're planning to build something, you make a design and then you talk to other people about it. You ask them if they can find any flaws or make suggestions to improve it. That way when you start to build it, you're sure you have the best design possible," Subaru explained.

Beatrice re-examined her design with a frown, "How could this possibly be improved on, in fact? I drew it exactly right."

Subaru coughed, "Well... I actually do think there's just *one* small design flaw."

"And what would that be, I suppose?" Beatrice demanded, standing up on the driver's platform with her hands on her hips.

"Well, it's just that... you're using four engines," Subaru said apologetically.

"Of course I am, I suppose. There are four wheels we want to turn so we would need four engines, in fact."

"Actually, we really don't, Beako," Subaru said gently, "Four engines would be really expensive and really heavy so those are two design flaws right there. The other problem is that with four different engines it would be really hard to make all the wheels turn at the same time or at the same speed. If a wheel on the left is moving faster than a wheel on the right then the entire wagon will try to turn right."

Beatrice mulled that over, frowning, "Then how do we fix that, I suppose?"

"Well, we start by only using one engine. Then we use gears to connect that engine to multiple wheels. Most vehicles back home would only supply power to the two wheels in back and use the front wheels for steering."

"Why only make two wheels spin, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"Err. Truthfully, I don't know. I wasn't all that interested in cars. I know that some vehicles make all four wheels spin and I've heard that some make the two front wheels spin rather than the back. I don't really know what the relative trade-offs are so, for our first prototype, I was thinking that we'd just make the back wheels spin and see how that goes. Do you think you can redesign it with one engine that can make both wheels spin?"

Beatrice sniffed, "Of course I can, I suppose. Betty has been studying Subaru's machines diligently!"

"Awesome, I can't wait to see it!" Subaru replied.

Beatrice scribbled a new design in a few minutes, "You mean something like this, I suppose?" Beatrice showed him the notebook.

Subaru glanced at it, "That is perfect, Beako! That is exactly what we want, you even used the minimum number of gears. Nice job!"

Beatrice flushed a little then glanced away, looking aloof, "Betty is often perfect, I suppose, but Betty still enjoys hearing about it."

"Betty is awesome!" Subaru cheered, catching Beatrice in a one armed hug so he could keep one hand on the reins, "I always wanted to have somebody in my family who was into gears and building!" He kissed her forehead.

"Hm. Soon Betty will be even better at gears and machines than Subaru, I suppose!" Beatrice boasted.

"Oh, you did *not* just say that! Challenge accepted, Beako!" Subaru laughed, "Well, if you've really mastered gears, are you ready for a harder wagon design?"

"And what would that be, I suppose?" Beatrice smirked.

"So before we can make a real dragonless carriage we need to solve two design problems: First, we need to figure out how to vary the amount of energy coming out of this crystal," Subaru said, reaching into his satchel and pulling out the crystal that Puck had charged.

Beatrice looked at the stone darkly, "Why did you bring that along, in fact?"

Subaru shrugged, "I just figured that looking at it might give me some inspiration for how to solve the problem."

"Please, be careful with that crystal. Betty does not want to be struck by a great deal of lightning, I suppose," She grumbled.

"Oh," Subaru said a little unsettled, "I didn't realize this was that dangerous. Huh," Subaru put it away, "Anyway, the other challenge is that we need to be able to change gears."

"*Change* them?"

"Yeah, remember how I showed you how connecting small or big gears to an engine changed the amount of torque it provided?"

"Yes."

"So we want to let the person driving the wagon do the same thing so they can change how much power the gears provide," Subaru explained.

Beatrice looked puzzled, "Wouldn't we always want to have the gear spin the fastest, I suppose?"

"Nope, faster does not mean stronger. You want the gears to spin fast on level ground but if you're going up a hill you want a gear that spins slower. That causes the gears to put out more torque and lift more weight up the hill."

Beatrice rubbed her chin. "But... is the driver really going to stop and replace the gear, I suppose? How many people can master Subaru's gears as well as Betty?"

"Almost none," Subaru agreed, "The trick is going to be to make it so they don't have to understand gears. We need to give them a lever that they can move that would switch the gears for them."

Beatrice frowned, "But how could we do that, I suppose?"

"Oh, no. Is Master Engineer Beako giving up already?" Subaru teased.

Beatrice stuck her nose in the air, "Betty can do anything that Subaru can do, I suppose!"

"That's my girl! Let's see some designs!"

Damn. Teaching Beatrice about gears and machines is actually a whole lot of fun. I wonder if I could have taught this subject back home. If I could have played with gears all day, I really would have been happy. I wonder why I ever gave them up?

I was a star in that gears and machinery class. It was the only class I ever excelled in. Why didn't I stick with building and designing stuff? I mean, it sucked that school never offered any other classes like that but I could have kept doing it as a hobby. Just imagine how different my life back home would have been if I felt like I had something I was actually good at...

Although on the other hand, would I really want to be back home anyway? I mean, I miss my parents sometimes but... I really love my new family too. I know that my folks loved me but... I never really felt like they understood me. Sometimes being loved without being understood just isn't enough. If you love someone because he's your son but not because of who he is... well, I always thought that felt bitter.

I could never actually say anything to them about it though. I mean, how do you tell someone that you don't think that they're loving you right? All the same, I think that being loved for what you are, rather than who you are, tastes a bit like ashes.

Beatrice sat there, pondering her notebook for several minutes without drawing anything.

Subaru waited patiently and hid his smile.

Don't push her, Subaru. She'll ask you questions when she's ready. Let her enjoy the process.

Finally, Beatrice looked at Subaru suspiciously, "Does Subaru know how to do this, in fact?"

Oh boy. She's wondering if this was a trick question.

"Yes I do," He assured her with a smile, "And I promise I'll show you the whole process tonight. But just to get you started, imagine a rod connected to the carriage wheels that has multiple gears on it. A rod that could be moved back and forth so different gears are in contact with the gear connected to the engine..."

Beatrice sat there for a few moments and then her eyes lit up and she started to scribble frantically.

Subaru smiled and looked out over the peaceful country side as the wagon rolled on.

That night, they sat just off the side of the road beside a roaring campfire. The plains were silent around them except for the snoring earth dragon nearby.

"Subaru is not a very good cook, I suppose," Beatrice criticized, nibbling on some grilled chicken.

"Yeah, I guess not. My mother had the same opinion," Subaru admitted, "And I'm even worse without a stove. At least I remembered to *bring* some food this time. That's important."

This is a great night. It's just me and Beako. We talked about gears. We ate, we teased each other. The only way this could be any better is if the whole family was here...

Beako really is turning into a talented little gear-monkey. I taught her the basics of a gear shift and she took off running with the idea. If she keeps this up, she really might get better than me with gears...

Hm. Maybe I should hold a few tricks back. I'd hate to make it too easy for her after all...

"Wow, Beako. Look at all those stars!" Subaru said, staring up at the night.

"What about them, I suppose?"

"I don't know. I just like stars. I was named after a bunch of stars back home you know," Subaru said.

"Named' after them?" Beatrice asked.

"Yeah. Back where I'm from lots of people claimed that groups of stars made pictures in the sky and they made up stories about what those pictures meant and why they looked that way," Subaru explained.

"Hm. Give Betty an example, I suppose," Beatrice instructed.

"Well, my name refers to the Pleiades, it's a cluster of seven stars that were called 'the Seven sisters.' The constellation was very important to a lot of old cultures because it rose at the time of the year when you should start planting and when the stormy season had passed so it was safe to sail on the ocean. The story says that the Pleiades were a group of beautiful maidens, all sisters. Their father was punished by the Gods and forced to carry the weight of the entire sky on his shoulders. His seven daughters grieved for their father's fate so much that the Gods finally took pity on them and

hung them in the sky so they could comfort their father," Subaru said.

Beatrice seemed to be mulling this over, "Is that story true, in fact?"

"No, or at least I don't *think* that it's true," Subaru laughed, "I guess these days I'm less willing to laugh off myth and magic than I used to be!"

"Magic is one thing, I suppose, but Betty thinks that this story is pretty hard to believe," Beatrice replied, staring up at the sky.

"Oh, I completely agree, Beako. I'm just saying that on my world there is no magic. There are no elves, no spirits. Not even a magic talking cat," Subaru said.

"Betty does *not* care to hear about a world with no Bubby, I suppose," Beatrice pouted.

"I hear you," Subaru shrugged, "I'm just saying: always keep an open mind. Before I came here this entire world would have been just a fantasy to me. And now I'm really here..."

Subaru was quiet for a moment.

"You know, Beako, I may just be the luckiest guy in the whole universe," Subaru mused.

"Hm?"

"I was never happy back home. Then somehow I found my way here. I met Red and Felt. I fell in love with Emilia. I got adopted into your and Puck's family. Honestly... I've gotten everything that I ever wanted and it feels like it all just sort of fell into my lap! I really am the luckiest guy around. I need to remember that more often," He replied.

"Hm. Your being with Betty is extremely lucky, I suppose," She commented.

"Damn right it is!" Subaru said, catching her in a bear hug, "Where are you going to find another sister as cute as mine?!"

"Hm," Beatrice said with an aloof turn of her head but her cheeks flushed, "Nowhere. Betty is one of a kind, in fact!"

"Yup," Subaru muttered, cuddling with Beatrice beside the fire.

Beatrice sighed, "Betty misses her Bubby, I suppose."

"I hear you," Subaru said, "I miss him too. Not as much as I miss Emilia but I do miss him. I hope that, whatever has gotten into her lately, she's gotten it out of her system by the time we get back."

"What does that mean, I suppose?"

Subaru sighed, "Emilia wanted... to get away from me for a while. She wanted to do some things herself. She wanted to be independent and prove that she was more than just 'my girl.' And I get that! I do. We may be a family but that doesn't mean I want us to be joined at the hip. It's just... we've only all been together for a little over a month and now we've spent close to two weeks of that time separated. Two weeks is a long time without Emilia and Puck. I really hate this. I hope we don't have to do it very often. Honestly, I hope we don't have to do this ever again. A few days apart is really all that I'm willing to accept without a very good reason."

"Betty agrees with that. Subaru should explain this to Emilia when we get home, I suppose" Beatrice replied.

"Well, it might not be that simple, Beako," Subaru sighed, "Emilia is going through something right now and I'm not sure how to help her. She may need space away from me while she figures it out. If that's what she needs then that's just what we have to give her."

"Betty is not in favor of more time away from her Bubby, in fact! Betty wishes to object to this strenuously!" Beatrice snapped.

"Hey! I completely agree! But this isn't about us, Beako. Sometimes when you love people you need to give them what they need instead of what you want. I hope that when we get back Emilia is feeling better about herself or at least doesn't mind me sticking around. I suppose if she does need more space you could always stay with Puck and Emilia while I went off somewhere with Reinhard and Felt."

"Betty objects to having to choose between her Subaru and her Bubby, in fact!"

"Yeah. I'd miss you too, Beako," Subaru whispered, cuddling her.

They stared up at the sky for a few minutes in silence.

Subaru sighed, "You ready for bed?"

"Yes, I suppose," Beatrice waved a hand and extinguished the fire, plunging the plain into near total darkness.

"Do you think we should set a watch?" Subaru yawned.

Beatrice shook her head, "Betty took care of it, in fact. This place is warded by magic. Only someone stronger than the Great Spirit Beatrice will be able to approach this place tonight."

"Well, that's a short list," Subaru said as he carried Beatrice into the back of the wagon.

Subaru wrapped a blanket around them both and they snuggled together with Beatrice resting her head on his chest.

"Betty misses her Bubby," Beatrice murmured before falling asleep.

Subaru looked up at the stars.

Emilia... We should see you by early afternoon tomorrow. Did you miss me? Will you be happy to see me? How do you feel about 'us' right now?

Beatrice couldn't have noticed anything amiss as she had her face buried in her notebook, hard at work with her designs.

Subaru was paying attention but unless he was using *Reason and Judgment*, Subaru wasn't terribly observant. He certainly had never trained as a soldier or been given any kind of training for surviving dangerous territory.

Subaru approached Arlem village in high spirits, never noticing the extreme quiet or the lack of smoke rising from the chimneys that should have tipped him off that something was very wrong.

Subaru didn't really suspect anything until he was physically entering the village square and still hadn't seen anyone come out to greet him.

"Beako," Subaru whispered, looking around with mounting concern.

Beatrice recognized the tone in Subaru's voice and quickly put her notebook away, "What's wrong, I suppose?"

"I'm not sure," Subaru said, glancing around. "Where is everybody?"

Holy shit, look at that house! It's almost cracked in half! It looks like it got hit by a meteor! Oh my God, is that Petra's house?! No bodies, no blood... does that mean Petra is safe? What could have done this?

Beatrice rubbed her face fretfully, "Betty doesn't feel right, I suppose..."

What happened? What could have done that? Another troll? Did the Gustekan army decide to come back here to seek revenge? But if so why are there no heads on stakes? Why no bodies or bloodstains? Would the soldiers really have carried off all the villagers, and if so why?

Subaru glanced up and saw an enormous fist that seemed to be made of purple shadows flying at the wagon.

"Beako! Hang on!" Subaru screamed as he grabbed Beatrice and flung them both out of the wagon.

A moment later, the wagon was crushed, broken into kindling by the enormous crushing hand. Subaru held Beatrice in his arms and pressed against a nearby house seeking shelter. The earth dragon pulling the wagon roared in pain, barely alive and with several broken limbs.

I'm so sorry, big guy. But I can't help you right now...

"Beako, any idea what that thing was?" Subaru whispered.

Beatrice shook her head looking sick, "Betty didn't see anything. Betty doesn't feel well, I suppose."

Subaru glanced up and gasped another giant fist was coming straight for them.

Subaru took off running just before the fist smashed the spot where they had been standing, cracking the wall of the house.

Another fist appeared coming straight for them and Subaru dodged it as well.

"What the hell is going on, Beako? What are all these arms connected to?" He yelled.

"What arms are you talking about, in fact?" Beatrice moaned back.

"You don't see them?" Subaru exclaimed as he leapt backwards to avoid being crushed by another fist.

"Betty doesn't see anything, in fact! What is making everything blow up?" She cried.

"You!" A voice screeched.

Subaru looked up. Standing on top of one of the houses, he saw a man with green hair and purple robes. His face was pale and shallow and even at first glance he appeared unhinged.

"You're the one!" The man bellowed.

"I'm the one, what?" Subaru shouted back with a bravado he did not feel.

"You took her away from me!" He cried, digging his long fingers into his own face with a cry of agony, "No! I will not accept this! To bow to this mistake, this unforgivable error would be sloth and my diligence shall correct it! I had her love first!"

"Who are you?" Subaru yelled.

"I? I... I am Petelguese Romanee Conti! A Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult representing Sloth!"

"The Witch Cult?" Subaru gasped, remembering Rem's comments about the Cult. He looked at Beatrice and saw her eyes wide with horror.

"Subaru, we must run!" Beatrice whispered, looking pale and nauseous, "We cannot defeat a Sin Archbishop, I suppose! And something is wrong with Betty's magic, in fact."

"Subaru Natsuki! You have failed to appear!" Petelguese screeched, "You have failed to atone! You have failed to ask pardon for the lies with which you have filled my Gospel! That is sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth! And I shall reward your sloth with my diligence! You have stolen her from me and that I shall not forgive; no matter what lies you place in my Gospel!"

"This guy is out of his freaking mind," Subaru whispered to Beatrice. He raised his voice, "What are you talking about? Whose 'love' did I take from you?"

God help me if this freak is looking for Emilia! I'll rip him apart with my bare hands!

"Her love! Hers! The only one, the only love! Satella! The Witch's love!" Petelguese screamed.

"Wait, what?!" Subaru gasped.

Satella... that was the name that Emilia gave me way back when we met but... Why?

"Give her love back to me!" Petelguese roared as dozens of massive arms made of shadows sprouted from his back like tentacles and began to zoom toward Subaru and Beatrice.

Subaru leapt away, dodging and weaving around the trees and houses to avoid the arms. Subaru took refuge behind a nearby building.

"Beako," Subaru whispered, panting for breath, "Are you OK?"

Beatrice shook her head, "Betty feels sick, in fact. Betty's magic is being... tainted by sloth. He is doing something to it," She muttered.

"Beako! Are you going to be OK?!"

Beatrice nodded, "Betty is not in any danger but her magic will not obey her so long as that Archbishop is near," She said in a faint voice.

Great! Another challenge, just what I needed!

"Beako, do you know anything about this guy? A weakness would be nice," Subaru whispered.

Beatrice shook her head, "He seems... familiar, I suppose" She admitted.

"Not helpful," Subaru muttered, listening carefully.

Where is that loon? Me running around the other side of a building barely qualifies as hiding, so why didn't he come after us? And why don't I still hear him shrieking and cursing at me? I don't like this.

Alright, well I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I'm going to see if I can relocate to somewhere else while staying out of his line of sight. Maybe I can hide.

Subaru slipped around the building and took shelter behind another house.

"Beako," Subaru whispered, "Do you have any suggestions?"

Beatrice moaned for a moment and seemed to be struggling to talk, "...Betty thinks we should not have let the knight leave, I suppose."

Subaru sighed, "That's a great thought, Beako but not terribly useful at the moment. When the house is already on fire, learning that you shouldn't have been playing with matches doesn't help much."

Subaru held his breath and listened intently.

I still don't hear anything. What the hell is this guy doing?

A moment later, the house Subaru had originally been hiding behind exploded from the inside out as huge tentacle-like arms burst through it.

"Where are you?! Where are you! This is sloth, sloth, sloth! I will unwrite the lies in the Gospel! I will *rewrite* the words in the Gospel! I shall rip you limb from limb and she shall remember me! Give me her love!"

Oh crap. For an utter psychopath, this guy has an admirable amount of concentration. Could I bluff him? Like I did with the Gustekan soldiers?

No, that won't work. I was only able to bluff them because they were afraid to die. This guy is probably crazy enough to walk through fire if he thought it would get him closer to his "witch's love."

Maybe I could use Indomitable on him? But for that to work I'd need him to give me an opening. Indomitable is a melee range ability and it only lasts for five seconds. That's a really short window for me to get close to him while dealing with all of those enormous, flailing arms.

Beako can't help me right now. I'll have to wait for an opportunity. On the bright side, he doesn't seem to know where I am right now, so maybe we could sneak away?

Subaru was debating different strategies when the house he hid against exploded.

Subaru dove to the ground with Beatrice in his arms, trying to shield her from flying shrapnel.

Holy shit! I can't believe we didn't just get skewered! If we had been hiding against one of the walls that this lunatic's magic arms had burst through, Beako and I would both be perforated with foot long splinters right now!

"Where are you?!" Petelguese now sounded close to tears. "I must be faithful. I must be diligent. I must rewrite the words!"

Subaru swallowed hard.

Alright, this is a terrible plan but it might be my best opportunity. Petelguese sounds like he's only a few feet away. If I rush him I could take him by surprise. The problem is that Betty is barely conscious and I don't dare keep her in my arms while I charge at him; Indomitable won't protect her. That means I need to leave her here and pray that the fight doesn't cause any collateral damage that would wound her.

Fuck! This plan sucks but it's the only chance I have!

Subaru gently put the unconscious Beatrice down on the ground in a place where she would be partially hidden behind the only still intact house wall. He prayed that she'd be safe there.

Subaru rushed around the corner at Petelguese and triggered *Indomitable*. Petelguese screamed at him and unleashed a swarm of shadowy arms that Subaru effortlessly smashed his fist through. Petelguese's arms shattered, flying every which way like bits of jello. Petelguese shrieked in outrage as Subaru closed in on Petelguese and punched him square in the chest as hard as he could.

However, Petelguese had spawned more arms to defend himself and before striking his chest, Subaru's fist had to first break through *all* of them. This greatly reduced force of his blow when he punched Peteleguse.

Petelguese went flying a good twenty feet and hit the ground rolling before getting to his feet, unhurt but clearly furious.

Subaru was already running away before Petelguese even landed, *Shit! Well that plan didn't work!* Subaru swore.

Subaru grabbed the comatose Beatrice and bolted away, heading into the nearby forest.

OK, I'll weave back and forth through these trees. Maybe they'll give me some protection. If he wants to grab me, his arms are going to need to smash through all these trees and that should slow him down.

Subaru heard coming from close behind him sounds like thunder; trees being smashed and broken.

OK, so the good news is that it sounds like Petelguese is doing just what I expected. The bad news is that it doesn't sound like it's slowing him down all that much.

Indomitable is almost up again but so what? He took the last hit and I don't think that I even hurt him. What the hell do I do now? Maybe if I caught him by surprise, it would work. The problem is that I'm not sure I'm going to get a better opening than the one I just got and he still spotted me way too fast. I wish Beako was conscious. Some of her magic would even the playing field in a hurry.

Subaru heard a tearing sound from behind him and looked back with a gasp. Petelguese had ripped a whole tree straight from the ground and sent it flying straight toward Subaru.

No time to dodge! Indomitable!

The tree came down on Subaru like an avalanche and he punched the incoming tree as hard as he could. The tree scattered into millions of pieces and by sheer luck thousands of bits of wooden shrapnel flew directly at Petelguese.

Subaru was already running away when he heard Petelguese's scream.

I could learn to like listening to this lunatic scream. I just wish that the scream sounded like he was hurt and not simply pissed off! Is Beako alright? Some sawdust is in her hair but I don't think that any of the tree branches or broken bits hit her.

"You! You are interfering with my diligence! You are trying to prove me slothful! Unworthy! Unloved! No! I will not permit it! I will have her love! Hers and no one else's!" Petelguese roared.

God, what the fuck is he talking about?! Who is 'she'? The Witch? Who is he even talking to? He sounds like he's talking to me but I get the impression that he's mainly just talking to the spiders in his brain!

Subaru was so busy looking behind him that he almost didn't see the huge ravine in front of him. He skidded to a halt, just inches away from the ridge.

He glanced down over the sheer cliff that plunged down into a rocky gorge at least forty feet below.

OK, so climbing or jumping down certainly aren't options. Would Indomitable protect me from a long fall? Shit, why did I never test that? Actually, since Indomitable won't protect Beatrice, it doesn't matter. Even if the force of the landing does bypass me because of Indomitable, I bet that Beatrice would still have to absorb the full force of the impact because she was in my arms. A jump from this height could shatter all of her bones.

Running parallel to the edge doesn't seem like it will work either. Fuck! I need to do something! I absolutely have to at least save Beako! I'd tell her to run while I distracted this freak but she's out cold! Should I just try to hide her here somewhere while I make my last stand? Petelguese doesn't seem to care about her so I doubt he'd come looking for her after I die...

Subaru held Beatrice tightly as Petelguese stomped toward them, walking on enormous arms like some monstrous spider. Trees splintered and shattered as Petelguese stomped on them without concern.

Well, I said that this was only for emergencies! Subaru triggered Reason and Judgment.

The calm confidence blanketed his mind but the fear, especially his fear for Beatrice, kept threatening to break through.

Hm. This is a grim situation, Subaru thought to himself, Beatrice is no help right now so you find yourself cornered and with limited resources. Your only real option is Indomitable but Petelguese has numerous ways to counter it. It appears that the time has come for you to sell your life dearly.

The fear rose up to choke Subaru and his calm faded a bit.

Very well. I can accept that. But if I do nothing else I absolutely must make sure that Beako survives. I need to find a way to hide her or protect her while I deal with Petelguese but... there are no hiding places here and running is not an option...

I doubt Betty could survive being dropped into the ravine. So really my only option is to throw her into the bushes as far as I can and then hope that I can fend Petelguese off long enough to lure him away. Beako said that Petelguese was corrupting her magic, that's probably why she blacked out but that should stop once Petelguese goes far enough away, right? She would wake up and recover. Then she could find her way home and locate Puck and Emilia. Petelguese isn't going to come back and hunt her down. I don't think that he's even noticed that she exists yet.

Alright then. That's my plan. It's a shit plan but it's all I got.

Subaru restarted time.

Subaru took a deep breath and was about to throw Beatrice into the bushes when there was a sound like thunder and Petelguese went flying off to the left. He crashed into a grove of trees with an impact that demolished his enormous arms and cracked the tree trunks.

Subaru could only stare.

What just happened?

"Really, why am I even here?" A man with white hair and white robes grumbled as he sauntered out of the woods. "I don't ask for much, really I don't. I am the most satisfied existence in the entire world and I wish nothing from anyone other than that my own personal rights be respected. And yet, here I am in the middle of nowhere, tromping through a dark, dirty forest because *someone* refuses to follow simple instructions. I ask you, does that seem fair? Does it seem equitable to involve me in your own deficiencies? To me, that is a solid infringement upon my rights and that requires some manner of restitution."

"Let's just finish this, Regulus. I'm hungry," A grotesque, painfully-thin looking youth muttered stepping out of the woods behind Regulus. He had long greasy hair and a mouth full of sharp teeth.

"That is rather offensive, Lye. I will finish this matter in my own way and in my own good time. I never intrude upon your rights to act as your judgment sees fit and all I ask in return is that you kindly respect my own."

Petelguese struggled back to his feet then lifted himself off the ground with his many arms. "What? What are you doing here?!" He demanded of the strangers, "I am a servant of love and you are delaying the fulfillment of my love. That is sloth, is sloth, is sloth! You are following the instruction of lies and therefore you are liars! The words shall be unsaid!"

"Are you interrupting me?!" Regulus seemed truly astonished at this, "That is unacceptable."

Regulus made a throwing gesture and another blast of raw force knocked Petelguese back and shredded his many arms that he had wrapped around his body in order to protect himself.

"Petelguese, I have never asked anything of you but that my own rights be respected. At this time I should be home, comfortably savoring the perfect existence that I have cultivated for my august self, as well as indulging in the kind of satisfaction worthy of one blessed in knowing that he is the preeminent existence on this planet. However, instead of doing so, I find myself here, being forced to chastise you for refusing to obey the Gospel's writ. Others may be accustomed to roaming through the countryside in search of wandering strays but for me this activity is really quite

intrusive. It was a massive disruption in the otherwise perfectly ordered life that I have provided for myself to come here and deal with this annoyance and that causes my remarkable equanimity to become unbalanced."

Regulus turned away and continued to monologue; indifferent to anything Petelguese might be doing or even if anyone was listening.

Petelguese regrew his arms and sprang at Regulus, crushing him with a swarm of massive hands but Regulus appeared to not even notice. He didn't miss a note of his incoherently rambling and narcissistic speech.

After a few moments, Lye intervened and launched a flying kick that nailed Petelguese in the stomach, knocking him back.

That was more than five seconds of invulnerability. That was way more than five seconds. It's like Regulus has Indomitable but it lasts a lot longer. Holy shit.

"Seriously, Petelguese," Lye grumbled, sounding bored, "This whole thing is pointless. I can't eat you so what is even the point of fighting?"

Regulus turned around again. "Are you not listening to me?" He asked them both. "That is truly unacceptable."

"Come on, Regulus. Let's just kill him and leave. There's nothing for me to eat here anyway," Lye sniffed.

Regulus looked very affronted but then calmed himself, "I suppose that doing whatever allows us to part company the soonest is a desirable outcome but I do so hate to be forced to choose and balance various trade offs and options. Having to carefully catalog and weigh my choices to optimize my own satisfaction is an infringement of my rights as my desires and wishes should be provided to me as I request without excessive effort on my part or else what is the point of being me?"

Regulus made a throwing gesture and Petelguese dissolved into a cloud of blood.

Subaru gaped at this.

Beatrice jerked awake in Subaru's arms looking around her in shock.

"Wait! What is going on here, I suppose?" Beatrice shrieked.

Regulus glanced at Beatrice, "Why are you daring to question me?" He asked.

Subaru blinked, "Um...well-"

"Please, at least be concise with your nonsense," Regulus said, "I am Regulus Corneas and I am in a hurry to return to my sainted means of being and every moment spent here delays that return and the fulfillment of my being. I have made no impositions upon your existence and I therefore would prefer that you make none of me, that hardly seems like a lot to ask does it? Yet you intrude on my equanimity with your questioning and discordant voices. Your stammering and gaping is unforgivably rude and that is deserving of some degree of correction, is it not?"

Regulus seemed to fling something at Subaru. Subaru quickly spun around, shielding Beatrice with his own body and activating *Indomitable*.

Subaru endured the attack without feeling a thing but the trees and bushes around him were all scoured away as if they had been obliterated by a landslide.

Subaru turned back to face Regulus and Lye with wide eyes.

Regulus looked startled, "Do you mean to endure my chastisement? That is uncalled for! I simply demanded that you and the annoying girl cease to exist and you are infringing upon my rights by refusing my command that yourselves shall end. This is-"

Subaru sprang forward before *Indomitable* timed out and punched the startled Regulus right in the face as hard as he could.

Regulus went flying backwards, smashing into an enormous tree hard enough to send a crack clean through the massive trunk. The tree teetered and then crashed down on top of Regulus.

"Wow," Lye commented casually, "I've never seen anyone hit Regulus like that."

Subaru glanced at Lye suspiciously, "Do *you* want to fight?"

"Why would I fight *you*?" Lye asked in evident confusion.

"Beako, are you alright?" Subaru asked the little girl in his arms.

She nodded, "Betty feels better but her magic has yet to recover from sloth, I suppose."

Subaru glared at Lye who just stood there looking bored, *I trust this freak about as far as I could kick him- without Indomitable, I mean. But if he really doesn't mean to start a fight then that's OK with me. After dealing with Petelguese and Regulus I just want to get Beako and me out of here with most of our skin! Twenty seconds until Indomitable is up again.*

Right now, Lye seems to be completely indifferent to my presence or even what has just happened to Regulus. He's just standing there picking dirt and grime out of his greasy hair. Gross.

Whatever, I'm not ready for another fight right now. The sooner I get away from Lye the better but I need to do so casually enough that Lye doesn't decide that I'm easy prey and change his mind about attacking.

From a short distance away, there was a sound like thunder.

The tree that had buried Regulus exploded outward into splinters and Regulus, completely unharmed, marched back over to Subaru.

"This is completely unacceptable!" Regulus yelled, "I was merely attempting to defend my rights to be in such a place and manner as I see fit and you have the sheer audacity to strike me? This is unconscionable!"

Holy shit. He doesn't even have a scratch after I blasted him back through the trees at Mach 3. He doesn't have a hair out of place. Fuck, he's not even dirty! And in spite of all that I've done to him, he doesn't even really seem to be all that angry. He's acting like a woman who's just been told that her coupon is expired and is now demanding to speak to the manager. Well, the longer he wastes time on his monologue, the further off cooldown Indomitable becomes. How did he survive being crushed by that tree? How long does his version of Indomitable protect him for?

"Beatrice," Subaru whispered to the tiny girl in his arms as Regulus continued to rant, "I want you to make a run for it."

"Betty is not leaving Subaru, in fact!" Beatrice snapped.

Subaru sighed, "Listen, Betty, I have a plan."

A really, really bad one.

"But in order for it to work, I need you to be out of the line of fire or you'll get hurt the same way as Regulus," He continued.

Assuming it hurts him at all.

"Go and hide in the trees and wait for my signal. If I die, then this is a fight you can't win. Run away and find Emilia and Puck. They'll take care of you, just like I would," Subaru whispered.

Beatrice's eyes grew wide with horror.

"Trust me, Beatrice!" He hissed.

Wait, 'Trust me, Beatrice?' You do realize that you just lied to her face, right? This 'plan' of yours is more of a roll of the dice than any kind of strategy.

Subaru continued, "I'll be OK! Now run!"

Subaru put her down and Beatrice quickly scrambled off into the trees. She hid behind a massive trunk and watched Subaru with sheer terror on her face.

I wish she'd just keep running. Or at least that she wasn't watching from quite so close but there was no way that I was going to talk her into that. Regulus is still monologuing to nobody but at least Indomitable is back online.

I don't know what's up with this Lye fellow here. He heard everything that I said to Beatrice and it doesn't look like he cares. He's just standing there picking his toes. He looks like he's just waiting for somebody to finally excuse him so that he can leave. The problem is that I learned the hard way back home that it's really dangerous having a disinterested observer bearing witness to a fight. You never know how long he'll stay disinterested or when he might decided to jump in to the fray and attack you from behind.

Oh well. Here goes nothing.

Subaru squared his shoulders and marched up to Regulus.

Regulus was so distracted by venting his frustrations at the situation that he didn't notice Subaru was even approaching until Regulus could have reached out and touched him.

Regulus recoiled with a disgusted snarl on his face, "What are-"

"Do you have the *slightest* idea who I am?" Subaru demanded.

Regulus gaped at him.

"I am the great lord Subaru Natsuki! He who is beloved by the heavens! By what right do you seek to contend with me? What madness leads you to stand there before me as though you were my equal?!" Subaru roared, discretely pulling the lightning crystal out of his bag and hiding it in his hand.

Regulus's jaw dropped. For the first time since he'd arrived, the long-winded Regulus seemed truly at a loss for words.

Subaru heard Lye giggling.

Subaru paused a second and then shook his head in disgust, "I have endured your slights with good grace and aplomb

because that is what a great lord must do when confronted by a base-born cur who can be expected to know no better. However, you have finally insulted my dignity with your insignificant attacks. Despite being unable to so much as put a scratch on me, you foolishly persist! You have misinterpreted my charity for weakness and that shall not be tolerated. Upon you I shall pronounce my judgment!" Subaru proclaimed.

Regulus's eyes bulged. His mouth moved but no words came out. He shook his head violently, "You... You!"

"Enough, Regulus Corneas! You waste my time and you are not worth the waste! You shall learn at *my* hand your rightful place!" Subaru roared triggering *Indomitable* and punching Regulus so that the lightning crystal shattered against his face.

There was a flash of light so bright that Subaru momentarily thought he'd gone blind.

A surge of wind like a great hurricane and a thousand lightning bolts picked up Regulus and sent him smashing and bouncing deep into the forest snapping dozens of trees like matchsticks and then slamming him into the side of a nearby cliff.

Regulus hit the stones hard enough to leave an imprint in the rock. More than a dozen damaged trees creaked ominously and then they all fell on top of Regulus burying him under at least four tons of wood as several large boulders that had been knocked loose by the impact tumbled down onto the trees from above.

Wow, I guess that crystal really was dangerous! Good thing I brought it along though. Even if Regulus does have Indomitable he's not getting up after being buried under all that. I doubt he could even move under that. Whatever his version of Indomitable's limit is, he's got to be about to reach it.

Lye whistled, "So *that's* why the Gospel said that you were special," He commented in a friendly tone, "Honestly, it's kind of nice to meet someone who can knock Regulus down a peg."

Subaru stared at Lye. *I don't get it. Why is Lye talking to me like we're buddies? Isn't he Regulus's buddy? Why isn't he upset that I just killed him? Who are these freaks and what is their connection to the Witch Cult since they appeared to be hunting Petelguese?*

Then the forest exploded.

Subaru jumped back as the dozen trees that had buried Regulus blew away into splinters and the boulders were crushed into sand.

Regulus Corneas stood there, completely unharmed, and there was rolling fury in his eyes.

Holy shit! What is this guy?! He doesn't have Indomitable he has something that's twenty times more powerful! He seems permanently invulnerable and he can generate shockwaves at range! What the hell can I do about this monster?

Oh my God. There's nothing that I can do. I'm really going to die here.

Well, Beatrice should be safe at least. I doubt these guys would bother looking for her and they came here to kill Petelguese so I expect they'll just leave after they kill me.

What the hell? What is happening to me that I can consider my death with that much clinical detachment? This world is screwing me up!

Fuck it. Nothing else to do but keep bluffing. The problem is that Regulus clearly has nothing to be afraid of so he's not going to back off. At least Indomitable is ready to use again.

"You! You...!" Regulus was nearly having paroxysms of fury as his body spasmed every which way. His anger had surged to the point that he didn't even have the means to express it anymore.

Regulus sprang toward Subaru, rushing at him inhumanly fast. His face was twisted and contorted with hate. Regulus had lost all control. He was going to throw himself at Subaru and strangle him to death.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Hm. This is dire, Subaru thought to himself. Regulus is far more powerful than you are and until other evidence presents itself, it seems we must conclude that Regulus is truly invulnerable to attack. However, he has also completely lost control of his temper. That is an advantage. It may not give you much to work with but it is an opportunity if you can use the surrounding land to your advantage. Remember what Dad used to do to you as a kid when you tried to jump on him?

Subaru restarted time.

OK, time for horrible idea number two. Maybe this will keep me alive for a few more seconds.

As Regulus charged into melee range, his eyes insane and his mouth spitting, Subaru triggered *Indomitable*.

As expected, Regulus reached out for Subaru's throat and Subaru... fell backwards. Regulus kept reaching for Subaru's throat refusing to back off but he was now dangerously off balanced as well as traveling at high speed. Subaru grabbed his wrist and stuck his foot in Regulus's stomach as Subaru rolled over onto his back.

In one smooth motion, Subaru tossed the astonished Regulus high over his head and sent him tumbling into the ravine with a howl of protest.

He hit the bottom with a cartoonish crash.

Holy shit! I can't believe that worked! He may be invulnerable but now he's stuck in a pit! That gives me and Beako a chance to run away!

Subaru quickly scrambled back to his feet.

Lye was rolling around on the forest floor, shrieking with laughter.

Alright, Lye isn't going to get involved. Great. I have no idea how much time it's going to take Regulus to get out of that ravine but I can't assume it will be long. I doubt his power helps him climb and if I'm lucky the closest place to get out of that hole might be miles away.

Subaru started to dart off and grab Beatrice when he felt a shadow sweep over him.

Regulus had leapt completely out of the ravine and soared at least sixty feet into the air. He landed a few dozen yards in front of Subaru.

There wasn't a scratch visible or a particle of dirt on his clothes.

And Regulus's eyes were absolutely insane with hate.

What the fuck?! This guy is absolutely cheating! What the hell do I have to do to slow him down?

Lye had stopped laughing and was reading a small black book with a thoughtful expression.

Subaru swallowed hard as Regulus glared at him nearly frothing at the mouth. *It's another twenty full seconds until Indomitable is ready. I am fucking completely out of ideas. I can't even scratch this monster much less make him back down.*

Wow. I'm going to die. I dodged a bunch of bullets since I got to this world but now I'm finally going to die.

Emilia... I'm so sorry...

Regulus roared and charged straight at him. As Regulus neared spitting distance of Subaru, Lye casually stepped in between them.

Regulus ground to a halt, "What are you doing?! Get out of my way!" He roared.

Damn, Regulus must really be angry. He's even cutting his speeches short now.

"Regulus, have you read the Gospel recently?" Lye sighed.

"What are you-" Regulus replied.

"Do you remember why we came here?" Lye asked.

"To kill Petelguese!"

"Yeah but why? Why did we have to kill him? Remember that part?" Lye grumbled.

Regulus drew himself up incredulously.

"Doesn't it seem likely to you that this guy is the one that we're not supposed to kill? The one that we came here to save from Petelguese?" Lye said.

Wait, what?!

"Don't get me wrong," Lye continued, "I think that watching the two of you throw down like this has been hilarious but now I'm hungry and I just want to go home."

Regulus looked like he was going to attack Lye but instead he just turned around and walked away fuming.

Lye started to follow but then looked back at Subaru, "Hey... Why did you kill our whale?"

Subaru blinked. "Your whale? You mean the White Whale? It was yours?! It was killing people!"

"Only the people that I didn't like," Lye replied matter-of-fact.

Subaru was literally speechless.

Lye looked sad, "I miss my whale," He moaned, turning away. He walked a few steps and then took a leap of at least forty feet into the woods and was gone.

Subaru stumbled back to where Beatrice hid in the bushes and wrapped his arms around her, cuddling the exhausted spirit.

Subaru felt his entire body trembling.

Subaru sighed, resting his head on Beatrice's tiny shoulder, "Well, Beako, I guess we survived that. Somehow."

"Betty was so scared," Beatrice murmured.

"Me too!" Subaru agreed, "I was terrified! But we're OK now. That's the important thing."

God, what the hell did I just go through? Every muscle in my body feels stiff as a rock! That was worse than fighting the Gusteko invaders! That was infinitely worse! What kind of world is it when someone who seems to be genuinely immortal can show up and try to pick a fight with you?

Subaru picked up Beatrice in his arms and started to walk away from the ravine. As he passed by the enormous blood stain that was once the Archbishop of Sloth, some impulse urged Subaru to take a closer look.

"Betty, who the hell were they?" Subaru asked as he began to inspect Petelguese's dismembered body.

"Witch Cultists, I suppose," Beatrice replied.

"I thought you said that Petelguese was the Witch Cultist," Subaru replied, looking over the tattered corpse. The only thing left of the mess that would suggest he had once been human were his boots, the remnants of flesh and bone inside those boots, and a small black book lying on the ground.

"They were all Witch Cultists, in fact."

"I don't know, Beako. If they're all members of the same cult then why were they killing each other?"

"Betty doesn't know, in fact. However, they were all Witch Cultists. They all reek of the witch."

"The same scent that Rem said that I have?" Subaru said, his heart sinking.

"Very similar, in fact. Put Betty down. I'm close enough to the library now to teleport us there, I suppose," Beatrice squirmed and Subaru put her down.

Weird. Usually this much blood and gore would have me ready to throw up. I guess Petelguese's body is an exception since you can't even tell that he ever was a person. He looks like something run over by a steamroller.

Why was Petelguese trying to kill me? I mean, yeah he was a fucking lunatic but he knew who I was. He called me by name so he didn't just target me at random. He was sitting here waiting for me. Even a psychopath does things for a reason, even if that reason doesn't make a lick of sense. Something must have happened that made Petelguese aware of me and made him think that I had to die. But what?

And why did Lye claim that they came here to save me? That makes no sense. How do they even know who I am? Why do they care who I am? Does this have something to do with the royal selection? Do they want me to owe them a favor?

Was Lye making up that story about coming here to rescue me from Petelguese? Maybe, but I really don't see why he'd bother to make up that lie. And if Regulus and Lye came here to save me from Petelguese then why the hell would Regulus immediately decide to kill me afterward? That makes no sense too. It's not even like he felt threatened by us either, he tried to kill me and Beako because he didn't like the way we were talking to him!

Or did Regulus... forget? He knew he was here to kill Petelguese but before Lye brought it up I feel like maybe he'd forgotten why he was going to kill him. It's kind of hard to believe that anyone could be that absentminded but Regulus strikes me as the kind of guy who doesn't need very much incentive to start killing people.

And what about Lye? Why did he not care that Regulus and I were trying to kill each other and then he suddenly cared and told Regulus to stop? And why did Regulus listen to him? He didn't seem to care what Lye said before.

Subaru knelt down by the dismembered body and picked up the strange black book that lay beside it. He opened it and glanced at the first page.

"Don't touch that, in fact!" Betty shouted.

Subaru flinched. "What is it?"

"It's a witch's gospel!" Beatrice said, turning away and returning to casting her spell, "Reading it unprepared will drive someone insane, in fact."

Subaru eyes widened when he realized he'd already read the first page. It said: "*Only a fool throws away knowledge of his enemy.*"

It wasn't written in the language of this world. It was written in Japanese, perfect Japanese.

What the hell? How is that possible? Does the Witch Cult know about my world? Or is this book enchanted in some way so that it rewrites itself to be readable to whoever picks it up?

Regardless of that detail, the book makes a good point, Subaru, He thought to himself in a strangely cool and composed tone. This book could tell you what the Witch Cult is doing and why they attacked Arlem. It could tell you why the Sin Archbishops left you alone or maybe even how you got to this world. It's extremely valuable to you. Besides, you know that it's not going to drive you insane because you just read from it. A risky test admittedly but still a valid one. Throwing this Gospel away like that is just foolish.

Subaru noticed that Beatrice was distracted by her spell craft and he slipped the book into his bag.

Subaru started to walk over to where Betty had opened her portal but stopped in his tracks.

Wait. Was that 'my' voice from Reason and Judgment? How did it reach out to me like that? I've always needed to trigger Reason and Judgment to get that voice. Now it can talk to me if it wants to? What the hell is going on? Is Reason and Judgment getting stronger every time I use it? Could that voice start following me around in my normal life?

"Betty is getting tired, in fact. Portals are hard to keep open," Beatrice tapped her foot.

Subaru jumped and hurried after Beatrice, slipping through the portal.

Subaru was so distracted by the sudden spontaneous emergence of *Reason and Judgment's* voice that he had already forgotten all about the book.

***Chapter 8*: Chapter 8**

Subaru and Beatrice appeared in the library.

"Home sweet home, I guess," Subaru sighed.

Beatrice had a small palm pressed against her head.

"Beako, are you alright?" Subaru asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She shook her weariness off, "Betty is fine, I suppose. Teleportation just takes a great deal of magic."

"Sorry, Beako. If I'd known that, I would have said that we'd walk," He said, hoisting her up onto his shoulder.

Beatrice sniffed, "Betty will be fine, in fact. Now let us go and find Betty's Bubby!"

"I'm game for that," Subaru replied, opening the door.

Subaru emerged from the library on the third floor of the manor.

"Emilia?" He yelled.

No one answered.

"Rem? Ram? Roswaal?" He continued.

Again no one answered.

Subaru felt a chill and started to run down the hall, "Emilia?" He called.

Subaru held Beatrice on his shoulder with both hands as he bounded down the stairs, taking them three at a time.

"Hello? Anyone?!" He shouted, reaching the first floor.

He ran past the sitting room and the dinning room but they were both empty.

Subaru had a mental image of Petelguese having caught everyone in the manor by surprise.

"Hello?!" He yelled, barreling toward the kitchen.

A tall woman dressed in a maid's outfit emerged from the kitchen. She had long blond hair and a curvaceous body.

"Hello," She said calmly as Subaru raced over to her and bent over, panting for breath.

"Who... are you?" He gasped.

"My name is Fredericka Baumann. I am a maid of Lord Roswaal. What are *you* doing here? This area is not safe."

"I could... ask you the same question," Subaru said, finally catching his breath, "Where is Emilia?"

The maid raised an eyebrow, "If you mean the Lady Emilia-"

"I do and I have no patience for games of formal address and courtesy right now! Where is she?" He demanded.

"And where is Betty's Bubby, I suppose!" Beatrice cried.

The maid paused, "You must be Lord Subaru. Lord Roswaal told me that you would come here. He asked me to remain here to meet you."

"Lady," Subaru growled, "The next thing you say that does not directly answer my question will end very badly for you! Where. Is. Emilia?!"

The maid raised an eyebrow but otherwise seemed to display no reaction to Subaru's threat, "The Lady Emilia is in the

Sanctuary."

"What Sanctuary?"

"The Sanctuary is a community located some distance to the west of this manor. Lord Roswaal brought Rem, Ram, and the villagers of Arlem to the sanctuary to escape the monster that attacked Arlem. How were you able to get by that creature?" Fredericka asked.

"Petelguese is dead," Subaru grumbled, "You should be safe to leave and the villagers can come back."

Fredericka's eyes widened, "Are you... sure?" She asked.

"Very sure. There's nothing left of the freak but boots and chunky salsa," Subaru replied, rubbing his face.

Funny how the thought that Petelguese is dead doesn't make me feel any better. Maybe it's related to the fact that today I found out that not only are there creatures that can swat me like a fly, I also found out that there are monsters that can kill those creatures with as little effort. This has given me new context for where I sit on the food chain and I really don't like it.

Fredericka seemed momentarily at a loss, "That was truly a heroic deed, Lord Subaru."

"I don't deserve much credit for it but that's a separate conversation. We need to tell everyone that it's safe to come back. How do I get to the Sanctuary?" He asked.

Fredericka gave Subaru directions to the Sanctuary as she led him to the stables outside. A two-legged black riding earth dragon waited there.

"Lord Roswaal left this earth dragon for you. He said that you would come," Fredericka explained.

"I've never ridden an earth dragon before," Subaru mused. "Are there no carts or wagons left?" He asked looking around. Usually the stable would have been full of them even if they were mostly covered in dust and cobwebs but now the stable was completely empty.

"I'm afraid not. All the carts were used to help the people of Arlem escape the monster," Fredericka replied, "Did you not bring a wagon of your own then?"

"Yeah but it got... crushed in the fight with Petelguese," Subaru sighed as Fredericka saddled the beast.

"May I take it that you don't know how to ride then?" Fredericka asked.

"No, but I guess I'll figure it out," Subaru said with a sigh as he laboriously climbed into the saddle.

I'm starting to understand why 'the guy who doesn't know how to get into the saddle' is a comedy trope. This is way harder than it looks. Fredericka is smirking and I swear that even the dragon is rolling his eyes at me.

"How exactly do you plan to do that, my lord?" Fredericka asked in bemusement. Subaru noticed that Fredericka had rather sharp teeth.

Subaru reached down and picked up Beatrice, setting her down on the saddle in front of him. "Because I don't have a choice," He snorted.

"Your pardon, my lord, but that is a motivation not an actual plan," Fredericka observed with a smirk.

Great, that's all I need: Another Ram. Not that she doesn't make a very valid point.

Subaru wrapped his arms around Beatrice and then grabbed hold of the reins. The earth dragon took a nervous step to the side and then seemed to settle down.

"Fredericka, are you going to be OK here all alone?" He asked.

"I will be fine, Lord Subaru. Lord Roswaal requested that I remain here and with the monster slain I should be in no danger," She replied.

"Fair enough," Subaru said. "Fredericka, Sir Reinhard van Astrea should be here in a day or two. With luck he might even get here this afternoon. Please tell him where we are and ask him to catch up with us as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," Fredericka said with a curtsy.

"Also since Petelguese is dead, can you try to send word to the Kingdom that the Witch Cult is on a rampage? There are more Sin Archbishops than just Petelguese roaming around."

"I will see it done," Fredericka promised.

Subaru reached out and awkwardly petted the earth dragon's neck, "You ready to take a run, boy?"

"Girl," Fredericka corrected.

"Girl," Subaru amended.

OK, dragons don't understand human words, right? Because I swear to God that this dragon just shot me an annoyed look.

"You know, Beako, it sometimes amazes me how often I'm surrounded by nothing but girls around here," Subaru mused.

"If it bothers you then hurry up and find Betty's Bubby and that will solve the problem, I suppose!" She snapped.

Subaru sighed, "Good advice." He lightly hit the earth dragon's ribs with his feet and the the dragon bent over and raced out of the stable like lightning.

"Whoa!" Subaru and Beatrice cried out in tandem, holding on for dear life.

Fredericka stood there and watched them zoom off into the distance, "I have completed your first instruction, my lord. I will tend to the other shortly," She mused to herself.

The dragon raced down the road like a runaway rocket. The dragon seemed completely indifferent to where it was going as long as it was going there *fast*. Subaru could only hold on for dear life but luckily the dragon needed no coaxing to follow the road.

Subaru and Beatrice screamed, clutching at each other, for the first few miles of the ride. After that, they managed to calm themselves somewhat.

Shit, this dragon moves faster than a car!

"Well, you can't say that this isn't exciting!" Subaru yelled.

"Betty doesn't need excitement! Betty just needs her Subaru and her Bubby, I suppose!" Beatrice shouted back.

"Well, I did promise you that I'd make your life more interesting!" He shouted back with a wild laugh.

"Subaru promised Betty that he would make her happy, in fact! So far, Subaru has led Betty into a fight against three Sin Archbishops and Betty is now riding on this land monster. Betty is *most* unhappy today, in fact!" She screamed.

"I hear you, Beako!" Subaru yelled, "Just remember that Emilia and Puck are waiting for us at the end of this trip!"

"That is the only reason that Betty is riding on this land monster! Why do you think Betty did not simply return to her library, I suppose?"

"Because Betty adores me and would miss me terribly if I were gone?" Subaru asked.

"Ugh! Whatever possessed Betty to pick you to be 'that person,' in fact?"

"I don't know, Beako, but I'm really happy that you did!" Subaru answered.

Beatrice paused, "So is Betty, I suppose! But Betty really wants to get down!"

"I totally agree with you, Beako! Just hang on! This should be a short trip, especially at the speeds we're traveling!" He shouted back.

The dragon raced onward, heedless of where they were headed and Subaru thought about Fredericka's directions.

"Beako! We're going to have to turn right up here!"

"And how would we do that, I suppose?" She yelled back.

"Um. I think we should try leaning to the right and maybe the dragon will respond. Lean with me!" Subaru instructed and Betty obligingly shifted her weight to the right.

The dragon shifted its own weight to the right and they barreled down the right path at the fork as Subaru steadied himself and Beatrice.

"Hey, that was pretty easy! Actually this is really kind of fun!" Subaru said.

"Betty does not find this fun! Betty wants to stop, in fact!"

"Hang in there, Beako! We're almost there!" Subaru shouted as the dragon left the woods and raced out onto a a broad plain, "Fredericka told us that when we reach the plain we just need to follow the road into the valley covered in forests," He shielded his eyes against the setting sun, "There! That's it, Beako! That's the Sanctuary!"

"Betty wants to stop! She isn't sure whether to ask the dragon to slow down and soothe Betty's tummy or to speed up so we can finish faster, I suppose!"

"Slow down?" Subaru said swallowing hard, "Oh, right. We still need to figure out how to get the dragon to stop, don't we?"

"Are you joking with Betty, I suppose?!" She screamed.

"Don't worry, Beako! We're smart! We can figure this out!" Subaru cried as the dragon left the plain and thundered down a heavily wooded path into the valley.

"Oh, Betty is very smart! Except possibly in her choice of contractor, I suppose! Betty speaks twelve languages, in fact! Do you think that this land monster would listen to Betty if she said 'stop' in one of them?!" She screeched.

Subaru hunched over as branches and leaves whipped at his face.

Subaru's heart dropped into his stomach. Racing at breakneck speed across a wide open plain was one thing but dashing down a narrow winding overgrown road in a dense forest was a very bad idea.

The world around them suddenly glowed bright green.

"Betty... feels... funny..." She murmured and slumped against Subaru like a rag doll.

"Beako?! Beako!" Subaru roared as they exited the forest path and entered an open meadow with a huge stone building sitting in it.

In the distance Subaru heard wailing and weeping coming from the stone structure. The wailing was a voice that he knew better than his own heartbeat.

"Emilia!" He screamed as the dragon continued to charge heedlessly straight ahead.

"Fuck!" Subaru yelled and pulled back on the reins as hard as he could.

The dragon squawked and skidded to a halt. It looked back at Subaru reproachfully. "Thanks a ton, girl! You're a lifesaver!"

The dragon clucked somewhat mollified as Subaru practically fell out of the saddle, cradling Betty's body.

Subaru pressed his ear against Beatrice's mouth but she was breathing strongly. She appeared to just be asleep for some reason.

Subaru kissed her forehead and then cradled her tiny body against his shoulder as he charged toward the stone building and Emilia's plaintive wails.

Subaru raced over to the stone building.

I wonder if the earth dragon will stay where I left her? Fuck it, I have bigger things to worry about right now. We can walk back to the manor if we really need to. Even if it does take a few days.

As he approached, Subaru saw Emilia sitting on the steps weeping, her head in her hands. Felt sat next to her awkwardly patting her shoulder and trying to comfort her.

"Emilia!" He yelled.

Felt jumped, "Subaru?! What are you doing here?" She asked as he rushed up the steps, "Wait, Beako? Oh, crap. Boss, you really shouldn't have brought Beako here."

Somethings weird about this building. It feels almost like I'm getting closer to an enormous bonfire as I climb the steps and the heat is burning into my skin. It stings but it doesn't seem to hurt that much, at least not yet. Whatever, worry about that later.

"Emilia!" He cried, grabbing her hands and pulling them away from her face.

Emilia looked up at him blinking, her eyes full of tears. "Subaru?" She whispered.

"It's alright, Mili. I'm here now," He promised, trying to hold Beatrice while wrapping his arms around Emilia.

Emilia buried her face in his chest and wept: Loud, ragged sobs that made her entire body tremble.

Subaru looked at Felt, "What the hell is going on here?"

Felt shifted awkwardly. "This... is going to take some explaining," Felt mumbled.

Subaru stroked Emilia's hair and let her cry herself out, "Felt, you said that I shouldn't have brought Beatrice here. Do you know what's wrong with her?"

Felt bit her lip. "Yeah, certain... kinds of people react badly to the magical barrier around this place. It knocks them unconscious. She'll be fine once she rests up a little bit."

Why do I have the nagging sensation that Felt isn't telling me something important? Never mind, I'll deal with it later,
"Is everyone here? Is everyone safe?"

"Yeah, we're all fine," Felt replied as Emilia's sobbing began to quiet.

Subaru glanced down, hoping that Emilia might be ready to talk but he was shocked to realize that Emilia had simply passed out from the stress.

"Heh. The little bitch failed again? I'm surprised, Ryuzu. Aren't you surprised?"

Subaru turned around and saw two people standing at the bottom of the stone stairs. One was a tiny elf with pink hair

who was almost swallowed up by her own robes. The other was a heavily muscled man with blond hair and a large 'X' shaped scar on his forehead. Judging by his pointed teeth he was a demi-human.

Subaru wordlessly asked Felt to look after Emilia and then put Beatrice down beside her.

Subaru marched down the steps, coldly angry. Emilia had been crying in sheer agony and Subaru had been unable to do anything about it. Then this jerk shows up and mocks her for it? Subaru really wanted to hurt someone right now and this dumb thug was literally begging for it.

"I don't think that I ever caught your name," Subaru growled to the blond man.

"Subaru, the elf is named Ryuzu," Felt called, "She's one of the leaders of the Sanctuary. She's nice. The other one is called Garfiel and he needs to be spayed," Felt grumbled.

Subaru glared at Garfiel.

Emilia is lying there in terrible pain and Garfiel is laughing about it? How would like a quick taste of Indomitable? No, calm down, Subaru. The asshole doesn't deserve that. Yet.

"So you're the Subaru that we have heard so much about," Ryuzu said. Her voice was a low whisper and not at all challenging.

"Oh, so this is the big hero that all the Arlem folks swore was going to come here and save them?" Contempt fairly dripped from Garfiel's voice, "The blond shrimp and the elven weakling talk about you all the time. I thought you'd be bigger."

Subaru ground his teeth, "Don't you have something better to do with your time?"

Garfiel snorted, "Yeah, I'm just like Logan at the falls. I better go and keep the Arlem folks and the Sanctuary residents out of trouble. If they're waiting on the half-elf to save the day then they're all going to be here for a very long time," He said, turning around and strutting away.

Subaru restrained himself from chasing Garfiel down and beating him senseless.

"Welcome to the Sanctuary, Lord Subaru," Ryuzu continued as if Garfiel hadn't spoken, "I've heard a great deal about you. I would very much like to talk to you about the situation here."

"It would be my pleasure, Lady Ryuzu," Subaru said with a slight bow, "But I have to tend to Lady Beatrice and Lady Emilia at the moment. Could we schedule our conversation for a bit later?"

Ryuzu nodded wordlessly and walked away.

Subaru climbed back up to where the girls waited on the steps, "Is there some place that we can bring them?" He asked Felt who was virtually buried under the unconscious girls.

Felt nodded, "There's a little cottage not too far from here where we've all been staying."

"Alright," Subaru said, picking up Emilia in his arms, "I'll take Emilia. Felt, you can carry Beako. That seems like the best way to do this."

"Works for me," Felt agreed, following Subaru down the stairs with the unconscious Beatrice resting against her shoulder. "It's a whole lot easier than carrying Emilia home everyday."

"Everyday?"

Felt sighed, "It's kind of a long story,"

"Alright, well let's get the girls somewhere safe before we get into it then," Subaru said. He put his fingers to his lips and whistled.

Wait, why do I think earth dragons come when called? Especially when they're called by someone they just met?

However, the earth dragon responded and she came over to Subaru and Felt but she did so with clear reluctance in her eyes.

Subaru reached up and stroked the earth dragon's neck. "Good job, girl. Thanks for all the help."

The earth dragon looked aloof and glanced away but she seemed mollified for the moment.

"Felt, do you have an extra hand to guide the dragon?" He asked.

"Yeah, no problem. We'll put her in at the stables near the cottage," Felt said, grabbing the reins as they walked.

Back at the cottage, they put the unconscious Emilia and Beatrice in bed. Ryuzu had helpfully appeared to take the dragon away and Subaru and Felt were recovering from the hike on the cottage steps.

"OK, Felt," Subaru sighed. "Catch me up. What have I missed?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story," Felt muttered, folding her arms behind her head and laying back. "Emilia and I came back to Arlem to get ready for that big meeting that Roswaal set up but it ended up not happening. That monster showed up screaming about you, and the witch, and love, and all kinds of other bullshit. We didn't know what the hell was going on but he just started smashing up the place. Roswaal told us all to jump into the wagons and make a break for it. Roswaal flew overhead along the way to keep an eye on the monster and he said that it was chasing after us and that it was catching up."

"You? Why did Petelguese want you guys?" Subaru asked.

"Beats me but Roswaal said that it was chasing us and that it was moving fast and we had to find a place to hide so he led us to the Sanctuary. He said the monster wouldn't dare to follow us in here."

"Why not?" Subaru asked.

"Because once you go in there's no way out," Felt said with grim humor.

"What did you say?" Subaru gasped.

"The Sanctuary is protected by some kind of magical barrier. Anyone can go in but apparently the barrier has a funny reaction to impure blood. If you try to go back out and you have a mix of human and demi-human blood, it sucks out your soul until what emerges on the other side is nothing but a still-breathing corpse."

Subaru stared at her, "That is positively idiotic!" Subaru exclaimed, "Why would Roswaal bring you in here? What the hell was he thinking?!"

"Good question," Felt sighed, "Apparently Roswaal's plan was to pass the Trials."

"Trials?"

"Yeah, according to Roswaal there are three magical trials that need to be completed to shut down the barrier. He tried to take them but evidently not everyone can. He tried to go into the Tomb to take the trials and the next time that I saw him he was stuck in bed with bandages all over his body. We all thought that we were trapped here permanently but then Roswaal revealed that he was certain that Emilia could take the trials, he had just tried to do them in her place to spare her anguish."

Subaru frowned, *That doesn't sound like Roswaal. Maybe he's fonder of Emilia than I thought.*

"Anyway, so Emilia does have the ability to at least *take* the trials at the Tomb. That's what she was doing when you and Beako found us. I've gone with her every day to try and keep an eye on her. The Tomb has some kind of anti-magic barrier. If you try to go inside and you don't have whatever qualifications you need to take the trials, your mana rebels against you and your body blows up. That's what happened to Roswaal. But I don't have much mana so it doesn't affect me."

"But why was Emilia screaming like that?" Subaru asked.

"I don't know," Felt sighed, "I wish I did. The trials give you some kind of vision or something but I don't know of what. She won't talk to me about it. It's been well over a week now and she hasn't even passed the first Trial. Everyday she tries and then she comes out of the trance, screaming and crying. I'm trying to keep her safe but it's getting difficult. The people of Arlem are scared. Roswaal told them that Emilia would save them but she isn't delivering. They're starting to blame her for their predicament."

Subaru had a momentary urge to smack Roswaal's head with a hammer.

Stupid Roswaal. First you knowingly lead everyone into an inescapable trap and then you manage to make the job of saving everybody you led into disaster Emilia's problem? Fuck you!

Subaru rubbed his forehead with a sigh, "Are all the Arlem villagers here? Are they all safe?"

Felt nodded, "Yeah, no worries there yet. The Sanctuary people aren't exactly welcoming but they haven't gotten hostile yet. They've been willing to share food and shelter but this can't continue on for much longer. The Sanctuary just isn't big enough to support another three hundred people. Food is going to start running short. The Sanctuary residents and the villagers are beginning to snap at each other."

"Well, why don't the Arlem villagers just leave?" Subaru asked. "The barrier is only a problem if you have mixed blood, right?"

"Sure, but most of the villagers aren't too confident about their genealogy. They don't know who their ancestors were four or five generations back or if those ancestors might have had mixed blood. That's the kind of secret that families try to cover up to avoid being discriminated against. The villagers *think* that they're human, they look human, but who can tell what metric the barrier is using to judge? Is it enough if your great-great-great-great grandmother had mixed blood? The only way to be sure if you can pass through the barrier safely is to physically go through it and that's a potentially fatal test," Felt explained. "Hey, look at me, I've got red eyes and I don't have the slightest idea who my parents were. Maybe I'm a mixed blood. I'm not super psyched about putting my purity to the test in a life or death gamble right now. Roswaal ran the numbers or something and he's guessing that if everyone tries to run the barrier about thirty percent will die in the crossing."

"And Emilia's definitely a mixed blood," Subaru sighed.

"Yeah, according to Roswaal if Emilia tries to cross the barrier she will definitely die. Beatrice too, I'm afraid. Roswaal said that the barrier reacts to spirits as well. It not only kills them when they try to cross it but being inside of the barrier makes them exhausted and weak as well," Felt said.

Subaru buried his face in his hands, *Beatrice, what have I done? I've dragged you to a place that's literally poison to you.*

"We think that might be why Puck disappeared," Felt added.

"Wait, what?!"

"Oh, we don't think that he's dead! He's just not responding to anything. Emilia claims she can still feel him deep inside the crystal but apparently the barrier is doing something to him and he can't come out," Felt said.

"Holy shit. No wonder Emilia went all to pieces," Subaru groaned, "And now she feels responsible for you too, Felt."

"Nah, I told her that I was sure that I was a pure blood," Felt replied, "She bought it. That way at least she doesn't feel responsible for me being here but I'm running out of excuses not to try to leave."

Subaru looked up at the sun setting over the valley rim, "I'm going to need to talk to the villagers tomorrow. Maybe I can calm them down. If nothing else I am completely positive that I'm pure human so at least *I* could go out and get help."

"What makes you so sure?" Felt asked.

"Because where I come from there are no other races," Subaru chuckled.

Felt's eyes widened, "Whoa. Seriously?"

"Yup."

"Damn. I know a lot of human supremacists who would love your world. Honestly, I might not mind it there either; a world free of racial prejudice..." Felt mused.

No, Felt. Not even close but I'm skipping this conversation for the moment because the notion that humanity actually invents races to hate when it can't find any real ones will just convince you that I come from a world full of idiots and frankly I'm not sure that I could argue the point.

"So that's what you've been doing everyday?" Subaru asked.

"Pretty much. Every morning Emilia and I head over to the Tomb and she tries to take the Trial. Emilia usually lasts for an hour or so before she has a full on breakdown. Then I drag her back home and put her to bed. Garf usually makes a few snide comments and I threaten him with a flea bath. Same shit, different day," Felt said, "Then after dark I go to the Arlem village meeting to give the chief and the selectmen an update and to urge them to be patient."

"I guess I should go with you tonight," Subaru said, getting to his feet.

"No," Felt disagreed, standing up, "You can do far more good by trying to work through this with Emilia. She won't talk to me but she might talk to you. Everything depends on getting Emilia to complete the Trials and the villagers will be much happier if I tell them that you're here *working* on it than if you go there and say you're going to try to work on it. Incidentally, do you know if you could take the trials instead of Emilia?"

"Considering the fact that being near that Tomb felt suspiciously as if I was about to catch on fire, I'm guessing not," Subaru sighed.

"Well that sucks," Felt replied.

"Yes, it does," Subaru agreed. "Alright, so you go off and do your public relations thing while I head upstairs and see if Emilia will talk to me."

When Subaru entered Emilia's room, he found Emilia sitting up in bed. Beatrice was in Felt's bed and still sound asleep.

"Hey, Mili," Subaru whispered, grabbing a chair and pulling it over to the bed.

"Subaru," She murmured, "You're really here. It wasn't a dream."

"Assuming you remember me with my pants on, no, it wasn't a dream," Subaru joked.

Emilia didn't crack a smile. She turned away from Subaru and stared straight ahead.

Subaru sat down next to Emilia, "Felt told me that you've been having a really tough time out here," He said, taking her hand.

Emilia nodded. "And now you're trapped in here with us," Emilia whispered.

"I'm not trapped, I can leave whenever I want. But why would I want to leave without you?" Subaru replied.

Emilia didn't respond.

"It seems like the Trials really freaked you out," Subaru coaxed.

Emilia nodded.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Subaru asked.

Emilia didn't answer.

"You can talk to me about anything," Subaru encouraged.

She just shook her head.

Subaru took a deep breath, "Felt told me about how hard you've been working at these trials. She told me that you've been trying to pass them everyday since you got here."

Emilia flinched, "Felt... told you that?" She asked in a ragged voice.

"Yes, she did," Subaru said.

I'm on dangerous ground here but I'm not sure why. Why would Emilia be upset that Felt told me how hard she's been working?

"I think it's great how hard you've been trying to save everyone," Subaru continued, "You're going to be everybody's hero!"

Emilia shook her head.

"Yes, you are! Everybody is going to frigging *adore* you when you break this barrier!"

"What if I never do?" Emilia asked quietly.

"Of course you will," Subaru replied in confusion. "You will succeed because you keep trying! You didn't fail once, or twice, or three times and then quit. You kept going. That's the real mark of inner strength and that's why I know that you'll beat this."

Emilia bowed her head. "I wish that Felt hadn't told you. I wish that you had never come here," Emilia said bitterly.

Subaru's breath caught in his throat.

"Now you know what a failure I am!" Emilia hissed at herself.

"You are not a failure!" Subaru said firmly.

"Subaru! What else can you call someone who does nothing but fail all the time?!" Emilia demanded with flames in her eyes.

"Someone who is *trying*," Subaru said calmly, "You're working hard to save everyone! Not everything is going to work out the first time you try it! But you've kept going so that you can eventually save everyone. That's real courage."

Emilia stared at him for a moment and then shook her head, "Subaru, you dummy. You don't understand me at all."

"What do you mean?"

"I wasn't doing this for the people of Arlem," Emilia said bitterly, "I was doing this for me!"

Subaru blinked.

"When we got caught in this trap running away from that monster, I was actually excited! I thought that I was finally about to prove that I could accomplish something. I thought this would finally be my chance to make you proud of me!"

"Emilia, I have always been proud of you-"

"Why?" Emilia asked flatly.

"Huh?"

"Why are you proud of me? Name one thing that I have ever done that made you proud," Emilia growled, staring at the wall.

"OK. How about the way you keep forcing yourself to take the trials even though it's obvious that they hurt you and that you really don't want to do them?" Subaru asked gently.

"And I keep failing," Emilia hissed.

"What about the way you worked so hard to prepare yourself before the royal selection presentation? You spent long and brutal days studying and preparing but you never complained once," He said.

"You mean all those times I memorized the strategies that *you* came up with?" Emilia snapped.

Subaru rubbed his chin, "How about the way that you're so determined to save the elves of the forest-"

"The ones that I cursed!" Emilia screamed, slamming her fists down on the bed. "I'm just trying to fix my own mistake! And what's even worse is that I'm not doing it! I haven't done a single thing to move us any closer to healing them. Everything that's brought us nearer to acquiring the cure was something that you did!" Emilia pulled her knees into her chest and buried in her face in them. "Why do I always have to fail the people that I care about?" She wept.

Subaru bit his lip, "Emilia, don't you think that you're being just a little bit too hard on yourself?" Subaru asked.

Emilia glowered at him, "Subaru, do you have any expectations of me at all?"

"Of course I do!"

"Then why aren't you ever mad at me when I fail? Why don't you ever get disappointed in me?" She demanded.

"Why would getting mad at you help anything? When someone fails they need support, not condemnation. I don't get disappointed in you when something goes wrong because I know that you tried your best," Subaru said, feeling absolutely baffled.

"No! You're never disappointed in me because you never expect me to accomplish anything! You know that you have to take care of me because I can't do it myself! You're the one who's going to save my people and I've done nothing to help them but come along for the ride!" Emilia cried into her knees.

"That is not true!" Subaru said, rubbing her back.

Emilia was quiet for a long time as she wept.

"I wanted... so badly to finally... make you proud of me," Emilia moaned, "I just wanted to help a little... so that when we freed the elves I would have contributed. But it's not going to happen. I'm too weak. It's time that I finally accepted the truth, Subaru," She said in a numb broken voice, "The only reason I'm even still alive is because you saved me over and over again. Everything that's been done to try and heal the forest was due to your kindness and your charity. All I can do is stand beside other people while they do things, like you and Puck. I'm useless."

Subaru wrapped his arms around her.

What the hell happened here?! I knew when she left that she was feeling insecure and wanted to prove herself but how did it blow up into this? I don't know what to say, I don't even know where to start!

Subaru sat there and held her.

Well, on the bright side, this is exactly what you hoped, for isn't it? A nasty voice in Subaru's mind said, You were always terrified that Emilia would leave you. You worked so hard to convince her that it was OK to be dependent on you so that she wouldn't be tempted to leave. Mission accomplished. Emilia is now hopelessly dependent on you and has abandoned any ambition of even aspiring to be more. She's all yours now. A ruined husk of a human being, too shattered to even try to stand on her own. You must feel great.

Oh God, I'm a piece of shit.

Whatever. No time to unpack a guilty conscience right now. Emilia needs me.

"Emilia, you are many things but you are absolutely not useless. You are not weak," Subaru said.

Emilia shook her head silently.

"Emilia," Subaru asked. He waited until she finally looked at him, "Imagine if our roles were reversed. If I'd just been savaged by this cruel trial and I felt hopeless and like I couldn't do anything, do you think you'd let me give up on myself?"

Emilia looked away, "That's different."

"No it's not," Subaru said, forcing her to look at him, "That's what you left the capitol to prove: That you were just as good as me. That you should be treated the same way. If you'd never give up on me, why would you expect me to give up on you now?"

"Subaru," Emilia shook her head sadly and looked down, "You don't understand at all."

"But I do understand!" Subaru replied, "I know it's late but I get it now! You would *never* let me give up on myself, Mili, and I'm not going to just sit here and let you give up on yourself."

"I'm *not* like you, Subaru!" Emilia wailed, "I can't do it!"

"Emilia, do you remember the night after the battle at Arlem?" Subaru murmured, "How I just... broke down and cried in your arms. I was so scared during that fight. I was sure that I was going to die."

Emilia looked at him expressionlessly.

"Now it's your turn to cry, Emilia, but I'm here for you. I'll stay here as long as you need. I'll help you put the pieces together until you feel like you can keep going."

Emilia's face hardened into a sour glare, "Subaru. You dummy. You don't understand at all," She whispered bitterly.

"What-"

"I held you after you had *saved* Arlem, not after you screwed up and let it get destroyed! Subaru, you haven't failed at *anything* since the day that we met! You did it all and you made it look easy!" Emilia screamed, "Do you have any idea what it feels like to stand next to someone like you and realize that you're just going to fail at everything you try?!"

"I-"

"Go away, Subaru," Emilia spat, rolling over in bed to face away from him, "I want to be alone right now."

Subaru stood there helplessly for a moment, then turned around and left the room.

Subaru tromped down the stairs.

Holy shit did I screw that up. Emilia is pissed at me. I don't know what to tell her. I don't know what to do! I thought that I was doing all of this for Emilia but I never realized that I was just making her feel inadequate.

She's angry at me because I haven't failed enough?

Oh the irony. Emilia, if you only knew: I have years, almost a decade under my belt of nothing but failures!

You don't get it, Mili. I'm the one who's pathetic. Everything that I've accomplished since I got here was because of the magic. Without Reason and Judgment and Indomitable, I'd have died a dozen times over by now. Hell, I couldn't even have found your insignia in the first place without Reason and Judgment! You would have walked out of that alley and gone back to the forest and I would have probably never even seen you ever again...

Wait, could that be the answer? What if I just told Emilia about Reason and Judgment? I'd just explain to her that my accomplishments have nothing to do with me... It's not that I'm brilliant or intelligent, it's just that... I'm using magic. That might make her feel better.

Shit. Can I really say that to her? Can I really admit that without my magic, I'm nothing but the same old loser I always was?

God, imagine the way that she'd look at me: "Subaru, I actually believed that you were special. I thought that maybe you really had something to offer. I'm glad that I realized the truth before we went any further. You lied to me, Subaru. You let me believe that you were someone you weren't. I never want to see you again."

Fuck.

Maybe I can think of another way to cheer her up...

Subaru was about to leave the house when he passed a door and heard Roswaal's distinctive voice inside.

Awkwardly, he knocked on the door.

"Come in!" Roswaal called.

Subaru opened the door and entered. The room was mostly occupied by an enormous bed and a few chairs lying against the walls. Roswaal sat in bed and his body was completely covered in bandages like a mummy, only his face and hands were exposed. Ram and Rem stood attentively nearby.

The twins bowed in unison.

"Welcome, Lord Subaru," Ram said.

"Welcome, Subaru," Rem said in tandem.

Ram shot her sister an annoyed glance and Rem flushed.

"It's good to see you're all safe," Subaru replied, "Roswaal, you look like maybe you haven't been so safe."

"Aaalas, no, young Subaru. I fear that I have led my people into great misfortune," Roswaal said calmly, "While we escaped the monstrous Petelguese we were unfoooortunately forced to take refuge in this Sanctuary and there is no way out."

"That seems like a pretty questionable decision, Roswaal," Subaru replied, unable to entirely keep the edge out of his voice. "Why would you bring them in here in the first place?"

"Aaah, once we were driven out onto the plains, hiding places were few and far between. The cart dragons were nearing exhaustion and Petelguese was in hot pursuit," Roswaal explained.

Subaru scratched his chin, "I don't get that. Why was Petelguese chasing you in the first place? He seemed pretty fixated on just killing me. In fact, when we found him, he seemed to be just hanging around Arlem waiting for me to come back."

"Aaah, so you have met Petelguese, have you?"

"Yeah. He's dead now. It's safe to go back to Arlem, assuming we can ever get out of here."

"Spleeendid work, young Subaru. A truly exceptional achievement, slaying any Sin Archbishop is not a trivial matter and Petelguese was known to be a ferocious fighter," Roswaal said.

Should I correct him? I mean, I wasn't the one who killed Petelguese but maybe it's smarter to let people think that I did. It's good for my image as 'Subaru the Invincible' which I absolutely need to maintain or else folks will realize that they can kill me easily when the timer for Indomitable runs out. Besides, killing an Archbishop must score us major points for the selection and it's not like Regulus or Lye are going to pop up to dispute my account of the events.

"Yeah, well he's dead now so we need to figure out how to get the people of Arlem home safely," Subaru replied.

"Yes. That is ooour concern now," Roswaal agreed, "Unfortunately the barrier is fatal to anyone of mixed blood."

"Yeah but I thought the people of Arlem were human. How many of them really can't cross the barrier?" Subaru asked.

"Aaalas there is no way to know without imposing a fatal test. Due to Lagunica's human centric laws, families attempt to hide any trace of impuuurity in their heritage. None of the villagers are confident in their racial heritage. I have performed some calcuuulations based on my knowledge of the community. I expect that if the people of Arlem attempt to cross the border, roughly thirty percent of them will die."

"Thirty percent..." Subaru whispered his face in his hands.

"It's a rooough estimate," Roswaal said with a shrug.

Thirty percent... that's one in three... Picture Petra, her mother, Meili, and all the other kids. Now imagine that one in every three of them dropped dead in the crossing. Or imagine that all of them dropped dead!

"Alright, then we need to clear the trials," Subaru said, "How do we do that?"

"Oooh, Lady Emilia is already hard at working doing so," Roswaal replied.

"Yeah but...", Subaru hesitated, "Maybe we should have a back up plan just in case."

"Suuuch as?"

"I don't know! How many people are qualified to take these trials?"

"Aaalas, only the Lady Emilia," Roswaal explained.

"Wait, what? Why?! What are these 'qualifications' anyway?"

"It is not aaaltogether clear, young Subaru. That stone monument is called by the locals the... Witch's Tomb." Roswaal said, his voice deepening with subdued anger. "It is unclear what gives someone the right to attempt these trials but everyone in Arlem and the Sanctuary have both presented themselves to see if they were acceptable. None except Emilia are capable."

"Shit! Well... can we *make* someone qualified to take the trial? Maybe some kind of magic or ritual?"

Roswaal's eyes glittered, "Perhaps, young Subaru, perhaps. Allow me to ruminate on it."

After that, Roswaal had asked to take a nap and so Subaru had stepped outside for a few minutes to clear his head. Rem and Ram followed him out.

"Lord Subaru," Ryuzu said, approaching the cottage with Garfiel beside her, "Could we speak for a moment?"

"Of course, Lady Ryuzu. Thank you for your patience while I dealt with personal matters," Subaru replied with a bow.

"Rem, please watch over Lord Roswaal. I will go acquire the food for tomorrow's breakfast," Ram instructed.

"Yes, sister," Rem bowed her head.

"Hey, Ram!" Garfiel said, bounding over to her, "Hey, do you...uh, need an extra pair of hands? I mean a beautiful thing like yourself shouldn't be-"

"Very well, at least you can be of some use even if it is only for manual labor," Ram replied, walking away.

Garfiel grinned foolishly and hurried after Ram with a blush.

"Garfiel!" Subaru called.

Garfiel turned back to Subaru with a scowl. Ram didn't slow her pace.

What did I just see... I know what I want to say but... those words just don't fit together...

"Garfiel, are you trying to... pick up *Ram*?! " Subaru asked.

Garfiel flushed, "What about it? Nothing wrong with a man liking a strong woman who knows what she-"

"Garfiel, why am I being made to wait for you?" Ram demanded, glancing back at him.

"Sister, be nice to little Garf," Rem whispered, too quietly for anyone to hear.

Garfiel hurried after Ram.

"Garf," Subaru shook his head, "You are the bravest man in the world."

Garfiel hesitated, confused by the sheer awe in Subaru's voice, "Well, 'course I am, ain't I? I'm like Roderick before the walls fell," He snorted and hurried after Ram.

"Also quite possibly the stupidest but why split hairs," Subaru murmured to Rem in an aside.

"Little Garf has always greatly admired my sister," Rem replied.

"Little? How old is he?" Subaru asked.

"Garfiel turned fourteen a few months ago," Rem explained.

Subaru's jaw dropped.

THAT guy is fourteen? He looks eighteen! Hell, he looks older than that! How big is this guy going to get?

Then again if he is fourteen then that kind of explains his 'tough guy' attitude. A lot of my friends went through that stage. Pretty sure they all cringe now whenever they think back on it.

"Lord Subaru," Ryuzu prompted.

"Yes, please excuse me, Lady Ryuzu. What was it that you wished to speak to me about?" Subaru said.

"We people of the Sanctuary do not wish excessive contact with outsiders. We understand that the people of Arlem were driven here against their will and they have our sympathies. We have tried to be accommodating. However this valley is simply not large enough to support all these new residents. The people of Arlem must return to where they came from. Soon." Ryuzu said quietly.

Subaru bowed, "I understand completely, Lady Ryuzu and I wholeheartedly agree. Lady Emilia is working diligently to attempt to resolve the issue and I will assist both of you in any way that I can. You have my assurance that we will remove the villagers of Arlem as soon as it is remotely possible. On behalf of the people of Arlem, I would like to express my abject gratitude for the charity and hospitality that has been shown to them thus far."

Ryuzu paused for a moment, "The food is running out, Lord Subaru. In a few weeks, we will all be on short rations and then a few weeks later, all the food will be gone. It will never last through the next harvest at this rate. When people don't know where their next meal is coming from, there will be violence."

Subaru frowned, *Strong words but I don't think Ryuzu is threatening me. She wants me to know about a problem that will need to be handled.*

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Lady Ryuzu," Subaru said politely, "I understand that this is a serious concern but it need not be a crisis."

"Any threat of starvation will rapidly become a crisis," Ryuzu disagreed.

"What I'm trying to say is that I won't *let* it become a crisis. I can pass through the barrier," Subaru explained.

"How do you know that?" Ryuzu asked and even Rem looked at Subaru in surprise.

"Err, long story, don't worry about it. The point is that if we think that lack of provisions is becoming a realistic concern then we will not ask the people to subsist on short rations. I will leave the Sanctuary and return with carts and wagons full of food. I have my own assets to spend and I'm sure that Lord Roswaal would also be amenable to repaying the the generous hospitality of the people of this Sanctuary. You have my personal guarantee that no one will go hungry from this situation. I would request that you try to make as many people aware of this promise as possible."

My personal guarantee, huh? I do have my own 'assets' to spend after all. What do I have left? Maybe five hundred gold sovereigns? How long can you feed about six hundred people with five hundred gold sovereigns? Maybe not all that long.

Ryuzu stared at Subaru for a moment and then bowed her head, "You are most generous, my Lord. I will take you at your word and inform my people of your promise. I will encourage them to keep faith in your commitment."

Ryuzu turned around and walked away.

Hm. The Sanctuary folks don't really have any reason to trust me right now but if I get Felt to tell the Arlem villagers about this, I think that at least they'll calm down. Maybe I should go out for supplies sooner rather than later. I can show the Sanctuary residents that I mean what I say and that my word is good before they start getting down to the wire and might really start to panic. I'll talk to Roswaal and Emilia about that in the morning.

The Lagunican nobility was in agreement: Priscilla Barielle's Triumph parade and celebration was absolutely the social event of the season.

That morning, an army of Anastasia Hoshen's teamsters and wagons had dragged the head of the Whale through the

capitol and the entire city had shut down in celebration. Numerous impromptu parades were held all across the city and ale flowed like water.

Crusch's army, which had accompanied Anastasia's caravan on the return to the capitol, dispersed immediately upon being dismissed and the soldiers wound up in bars and saloons across the city where they were persuaded to recount the story of the daring battle that had finally slain the scourge of the continent. The soldiers were extremely modest, claiming that they had contributed little to the fight personally but to have the chance to fight shoulder to shoulder with the Sword Saint against the terrifying beast that had nearly devoured them all during the battle was more than reward enough. At least fifty of Crusch's soldiers claimed that they had put out one of the beast's eyes personally.

The nobility were ecstatic, not only that this dangerous monster that had plagued the land for centuries had finally been slain, but that each of the royal candidates had contributed to the result in their own way. Many uncommitted nobles and powerful merchants spoke highly of all the candidates, sagely commenting that these royal candidates being able to put aside their own ambition and rivalry to work together for the good of Lagunica spoke volumes about their character and the bright future that awaited Lagunica no matter which person gained the throne.

Praise was lavished on all the candidates and if perhaps somewhat more praise fell upon Subaru Natsuki, who had sounded the trumpet and organized the hunt, and whose knight had actually secured the kill, what of that?

The camp of Crusch Karnstein had stood with the camp of Subaru and Emilia Natsuki to slay the beast. The camp of Anastasia Hoshen had deliver the beast's corpse as proof and sent word to all corners of the land of the victory, both done at considerable expense. The camp of Priscilla Barielle had organized and prepared an enormous Triumph parade and the later Triumph party to welcome the weary warriors home and grant the entire city a rare respite from labor and toil.

Baron Georg of Monmouth and the Marquis de Feir were two elder statesmen and very dear friends. A pair of minor nobles of no particular importance, they had served in the royal court for a combined one hundred and forty years. They had seen nearly everything during their sojourn in the court but even they admitted the death of the Whale was remarkable. These nobles were too inconsequential to have been courted by any faction yet, and in truth they were indifferent to who gained the throne, both feeling that they were simply too old to care. They had come to the Triumph tonight simply to observe the intricate dance of the various players and powers in the city, a hobby that they pursued with as much passion as younger men might devote to following horse racing or games of sport.

"This is the grandest party I have ever seen," Feir mused, "Everyone is feeling wild and liberated tonight, especially the lovely young ladies of the court. Oh, if I were twenty years younger!"

"You'd still be in your sixties, you old fool" Georg observed with a smile, "Still this is a night to remember, I suppose. How large is the Lady Priscilla's party anyway? It seems to overflow the entire building."

"Who is to say, old friend? Perhaps not even Lady Priscilla knows for sure. The entire city is dancing and celebrating tonight, it is simply impossible to tell where one gala ends and another begins!" Feir mused.

"I see that the Lady Priscilla is holding court surrounded by her well wishers," Georg said, gesturing with his glass of champagne, "She seems to be thriving tonight."

"The Lady Priscilla may be frivolous but she is surely no fool, Georg," Feir smirked, "Her faction is making huge gains during this Triumph."

"Really? You astound me. Lady Priscilla was barely involved in the Whale hunt," Georg replied.

"Ah yes, this is the brilliance of her plan! As I said, it's impossible to know which festivities in the city the Lady Priscilla actually arranged and paid for. She may have been the least involved in the hunt but by mutely taking credit for *all* of these enormous celebrations, she is the most *visibly* involved to the people!" Feir explained, tossing back his champagne.

"I see," Georg mused, "That is really quite brilliant."

Georg listened to the crowd surrounding Lady Priscilla with interest.

"Lady Priscilla," A young ducal heir began, "Permit me to congratulate you on your outstanding celebration. The entire city both rich and poor are all rejoicing tonight and that is entirely due to your extravagant generosity. It speaks volumes about your own character and your empathy with the less advantaged. I am confident that this evening will attract a great deal of new support to your own faction."

Priscilla hesitated for just a moment. Then the entire crowd surrounding her audibly gasped as Priscilla Barielle *bowed her head* the slightest degree. "You are entirely too generous to me, my Lord," She replied, "My contribution to the Whale Hunt was extremely modest, merely seeking to welcome our valiant warriors home with due honor and to reassure the people of Lagunica of the dawning of a new era. The very considerable fortune dispensed by House Barielle to ensure this is a celebration of special magnificence need not be mentioned. What less could I have done to reassure the people that they can trust in the good stewardship of their future queen?"

Priscilla finished speaking but nobody responded. The crowd assembled around her were completely stupefied.

"Another cunning device," Georg admitted.

"I dare say, old friend. It is entirely possible that the Lady Priscilla has never bowed her head before in her life! Much less modestly downplayed her own contributions to a cause. However, alas, she has overplayed her hand. Everyone can smell that her false humility is nothing more than an artifice," Feir sniffed.

"Irrelevant, my good Feir," Georg disagreed, "Lady Priscilla is not demonstrating her humility but rather her adaptability. Tonight she is going out of her way to present herself as gracious and to restrain her pride. She is proving to all assembled that even if her luck is not infallible, she can still turn situations to her advantage by her wits. In truth, I had rather feared that Priscilla was finished after her abject humiliation at the hands of the stranger, Subaru Natsuki, not to mention her extremely clumsy recovery speech afterward."

"'Feared', you say?" Feir raised an eyebrow, "That seems most unusual for you, Georg. Is it possible that you have become invested in the fortunes of Lady Priscilla? Or perhaps her beauty has simply caught your eye. I would not blame you. The Sun Princess is a radiant jewel that shines whenever the light strikes her."

"Please! Foist not your ludicrous romantic fantasies onto me, old friend," Georg sighed, "Even in my youth I never had your obsessive fascination for the beauty of women. My concern was simply that the field of candidates was shrinking much too rapidly. A game of this scope and majesty occurs once ever few centuries. I would despair if it were cut short. And we had already seen two candidates fusing and bringing us down to four contenders in total. This was all the bad luck that I could stomach."

"It was a small loss, however," Feir observed, "The elf maid would have quickly withdrawn or been defeated. Her union with Subaru Natsuki has breathed new life into the game. I curse myself that I thought the selection's announcement would be too pedestrian to bother attending. To have seen Subaru Natsuki challenge Lady Priscilla and then outmaneuver all challengers on the floor; I would have given a great deal to have been there."

"I did try to tell you, Feir," Georg shrugged.

"What about Lady Anastasia Hoshen?" Feir said, changing the subject. "She seems to have made a very limited contribution to the Whale Hunt as well and she doesn't have the publicly visible role of Lady Priscilla to make up for it."

"I have found that this is not limiting her at all," Georg said with some admiration, "She is currently paying court to all the men of means who work behind the scenes and believe that is their unseen hands that keep the kingdom running while all the nobles are busy admiring themselves. She's portraying herself as 'one of them' who has risen to prominence by nothing other than her wits and hard work and may yet rise higher to become queen."

"A clever gambit," Feir admitted, "Do you suppose that it will work?"

They looked at Anastasia Hoshen who stood nearby, speaking to a trader.

"Lady Anastasia," A tall merchant prince said, "I find it remarkable that your trade company was so willing to transport the beast's head all the way back here. I closed my office early today to catch a glimpse of the monster. It was enormous! Transporting the creature must have set you back a fortune. Your actions were most charitable."

"Oh no, please do not call it charity, Master Merchant. It was an investment," She replied.

"I'm not sure that I follow, Lady Anastasia," The merchant replied.

"I'm a greedy girl, Master Merchant. I only give up money if I'm going to make more money. Trade routes have suffered for years because of the whale's attacks. Caravans have always needed to be small enough to not arouse the beast's attention. This raises prices on transport costs enormously and provides tight constraints on supply chains. By bringing the Whale's head back here and publicly displaying it, I managed to remove all doubt from anyone that the whale truly is dead and the merchants of Lagunica will react accordingly. Trade will surge across the continent and new markets will open up where before the transportation costs were prohibitive. This economic boom will bring great profit and revenue to all of Lagunica, and not the least of which, their future queen."

"Truly, you have the eye and mind of a born leader, Lady Anastasia," The merchant replied almost in awe, "You eschew the personal glory of the hunt but offer services free of charge to your rivals. This not only earns you vast goodwill from the masses but will in truth further your own goals. You are precisely the type of commander that Lagunica so sorely needs. The Ship of State must be guided by a king that wields enough wisdom to steer it safely around the shoals and I am proud to offer you the full support of my family and my entire trading network to make it so!"

"You flatter me, Master Merchant," Anastasia giggled with a polite curtsy.

Feir tossed back another champaign. "I dare say that her plan *is* working," Feir murmured.

"Strange that Subaru Natsuki did not appear tonight. He would have stirred the pot if nothing else and there might have been more to watch," Georg mourned.

"Yes, it is very strange, is it not?" Feir admitted, "But it may turn to our good fortune. I was also beginning to fear that the selection would be, for all intents and purposes, wrapped up and finished in just a few weeks. Subaru Natsuki's absence gives Lady Crusch and the other candidates a chance to claw back some of their stolen prestige."

"Unfortunately, since Lady Crusch made such strong gains in the selection early on, her support this evening is growing slower than the others. The nobles most likely to declare for Crusch early on had already done so before the party. She will need to work harder to persuade the remainder that she is the woman to guarantee their future prosperity. That said she is performing exceptionally tonight," George admitted, "She is the belle of the ball."

"Indeed," Feir agreed, "I had always considered the Lady Crusch to be rather serious minded, one might even go so far as to say dour. But tonight she has been simply scintillating. Her rapier wit has delighted the crowds and I actually laughed at some of her ironic witticisms about herself, the hunt, and the selection in general."

"You lie, old friend! You haven't laughed in years!" Georg chuckled.

"I tell you, it is true," Feir replied, "The Lady Crusch's strange irreverence tonight has won her many admirers who previously were known to hold serious misgivings about the Lady Crusch Karnstein becoming queen. Truly masterful game play. I would not have expected such a subtle move from the Lady Crusch."

The two old friends continued to chat about the various points of the intricate dance being performed all around them. However one thing that they seem to be in general agreement on was that this night was a huge success for all the underdog candidates, including for Lady Crusch.

Georg and Feir concluded that Crusch must have practiced and trained for weeks to depict herself with this charming form of irreverent wit.

Only Felix, standing slightly behind Crusch, who knew his lady even better than he knew himself, understood the real truth. What everyone else interpreted as playful wit and irreverence was actually the strain showing on his mistress as she struggled to control herself.

Crusch Karnstein was *livid*.

Earlier tonight, Crusch had been behaving normally. She was quite pleased with how the situation had turned out for her. The only thing that worried her was the complete absence of any representative of the Natsuki camp in attendance.

It's strange that Subaru isn't here and anything strange is suspicious. Could he really be as arrogant as he acted during that first meeting? Does he truly believe that he would win the election without any serious effort? Surely he couldn't be that foolish. Then again during the Whale Hunt, Subaru Natsuki portrayed himself as far less arrogant than during our initial meeting but also far more foolish. Which is the true Subaru Natsuki and which is the act?

I'm making significant inroads with the uncommitted nobility in Subaru's absence tonight. I'm well aware that the only reason most of them are spending so much time listening to me is because Subaru did not attend. However, regardless of the particulars, tonight should fully solidify my position in second place and with luck I might even draw level with Subaru if he does not come out to defend his claim.

But why? Why is Subaru not here to solidify his position? This is the ideal moment to lock these things down. Could bad luck have finally struck him and he simply couldn't make it?

Oh yes, that seems very probable. I bet that his carriage broke down and that is why he isn't here. Maybe he came down with a sniffle. Or perhaps the babysitter hired for the Great Spirit canceled at the last minute. Yes, that all seems realistic!

No, something more is going on here.

Moreover why are no members of his camp here at all? The girl Felt has become the darling of the court and she could have dazzled all assembled here again with minimal effort. The Sword Saint could have not said a word; by his mere presence he would have solidified even more support for Subaru. Even the Lady Emilia could have stood here to lap up adulation and offers of support. After her camp just slew the White Whale, no one would dare even mention her race as a pejorative. Anyone so foolish might well have been lynched by the crowd tonight.

No, Subaru isn't just missing. He and his camp are deliberately avoiding the festivities. Why?

Crusch briefly excused herself and stepped out on the balcony with a glass of wine so she would have the luxury of thinking for a moment without constantly having to interrupt herself to make idle chit chat.

She pondered the problem for several minutes until she idly noticed the groups on the ballroom floor that had collected themselves out of the massive crowd of guests. Many of the nobles attending here tonight had not publicly declared for any candidate yet and they stood together, forming the largest group. The second largest group by a considerable margin was the one that had declared for Subaru Natsuki. After that came the groups that had declared for the other three candidates.

Crusch's eyes widened in realization. Crusch's group should be comfortably in second place however as she looked more closely those three groups were roughly equal in size.

How did I let this happen? Crusch demanded of herself, Subaru Natsuki has outsmarted me again!

Subaru deliberately avoided the Triumph to sabotage me! By not attending himself but having the three of us share the ceremony, he's made this election into a contest between Subaru Natsuki and 'the other three!'

I knew that the other candidates would be involved after the hunt for the Whale but I thought nothing of it. Anastasia's contribution was nothing more than a glorified shipping service, a fitting role for a merchant. And Priscilla contributed nothing at all other than throwing a party, which is frankly all that she's good for. Yet we're all sharing credit equally tonight!

I didn't foresee the brilliance of Subaru's plan. By both claiming the deed in advance and by his possession of the Sword Saint who won the kill, Subaru earned the lion share of the accolades for slaying the Whale. This was inevitable. But I assumed that as the only military force assisting him I would receive clearly the second place's worth of honors. This was my mistake and it is blindingly obvious now.

The people don't see the distinction between my military assistance and Anastasia's shipping assistance or even Priscilla's party planning! They view all our efforts equally. What's worse is that I started the contest comfortably in second place: Priscilla had been publicly humiliated and Anastasia was virtually unknown in Lagunica. However by

participating in this enormous ceremony with the other two I've effectively raised their status! I've broadened the race so that I now find myself competing for second place in a three way tie!

Crusch ground her teeth.

Subaru Natsuki is a strategist among strategists. Under other circumstances I might even have set my cap for him. Our children would conquer the world.

I keep underestimating him! He offered me the whale and pretended it was simply largesse offered to one he believed was defeated. I was a fool to accept that at face value! He provoked me deliberately! He knew that I would be so angry at his presumption and his patronizing insolence that I would stop thinking straight. Of course the contest wasn't decided yet, only a fool could have believed otherwise and Subaru had given me ample evidence that he was no fool. Yet I still didn't see the trap.

Later when he mentioned that the other candidates would assist in a post combat role I didn't give it a second thought. I am a soldier at heart. I expected the issue of credit for the hunt to be settled in the field. But Subaru's brilliant insight was this: that credit would be awarded not in the field but in the capitol and by inviting the other two to participate only after the battle was decided, he lulled me into a false sense of security. The people saw the three of us standing side by side during the ceremony and thus were accolades doled out evenly.

I never even saw his plan but in one deft move Subaru Natsuki has pulled my rivals up and simultaneously jerked me down! The three of us will be so busy ripping into each other, jockeying for second place, that Subaru Natsuki could walk to victory virtually unopposed.

"Crusch, are you OK, nya?" Felix said coming out on the balcony, "Why do you look so upset? This night is going wonderfully for you, nya."

Crusch bent over the railing with a sigh, "I'm afraid you don't see the webs within the webs, my dear friend. Don't be hurt, neither did I until now. Our foe has stolen yet another march on us and I have been outplayed once again."

"Huh?"

Crusch quickly filled her friend in on what she had uncovered.

Felix's eyes grew wide and he quickly glanced back at the party filling in a few blanks. Felix was extremely clever. It didn't take him long.

"But Crusch, if this is true..."

Crusch shook her head, "I am Crusch of House Karnstein. I am a Duke and the daughter of many Dukes. I have trained since I was a small girl to have one of the finest tactical minds in all the world. And yet tonight I can't help but wonder if I am nothing more than a babe in the hands of a giant," She sighed.

"Then what is Subaru doing tonight, nya? Is he celebrating-"

"He is out working. He's out among the peasants spreading word of crop techniques or working to empty the slums," Crusch said bitterly, "By this time next week the stories will be all over Lagunica: How after killing the whale, Subaru Natsuki was hard at work fixing the problems of the kingdom while we were all here resting on our laurels and drinking champaign. It's genius, Felix, absolute genius."

"But Crusch, I still don't understand something, nya," Felix murmured, "Why did Subaru Natsuki play the foolish popinjay when he was on the Hunt with us? What was the point in acting stupid? He couldn't have expected us to underestimate him a second time, nya."

"*Didn't* we underestimate him a second time?" Crusch asked simply.

Felix gaped at her.

Crusch sighed, "Two full weeks, Felix. He marched with us, ate with us, planned with us, and joked with us. We did everything but sleep with him! Two weeks and at no time did his mask of being nothing more than a foolish bumbler ever slip. Not once did he break character," Crusch pinched the bridge of her nose, "Can you even imagine the kind of concentration, of discipline, such a performance must have required? The man's will is iron."

"Crusch... You're not... giving up, are you, nya?" Felix asked in a whisper.

"Of course not. I will never surrender," She replied, "I will fight to the end even if the end is bitter," She turned to face Felix fully, "But from now on we must face the truth squarely, my friend: We are outmatched. In spite of all of our efforts and planning we are fighting at a severe disadvantage against a masterful foe. We must redouble our efforts to find a way to turn the contest back to our advantage!"

"Where Crusch Karnstein leads we will follow, nya!" Felix proclaimed.

Around the same time, Subaru was preparing for bed. Felt had returned to the room in good humor from her meeting with the villagers and the Sanctuary residents.

Subaru had taken the still sleeping Beatrice off of Felt's bed to give Felt a place to sleep. Beatrice had woken up only long enough to be briefed on the situation and then nodded off again. Subaru now sat on Emilia's bed with Beatrice on

his lap while Emilia lay there, staring at the wall.

"You're a miracle worker, boss," Felt said, asking Subaru to turn around while she got ready for bed.

"Me? What the hell did I do?" Subaru grumbled, trying to think of how he could reach Emilia.

"Just being here was enough! The last few times I went to these meetings, the villagers were furious that they were still trapped inside here! Last night, I thought they were going to crucify me upside down. But tonight I go and the first thing I said was 'Subaru Natsuki is here.' It was like the sun coming out on all their faces. Some of them even suggested that they start packing! Those guys believe in you, boss. They know that you'll find a way to get them out."

For fuck's sake, Felt, stop talking! Subaru wanted to scream. He heard Emilia's deep sigh.

Everything I say and do just seems to make Emilia feel worse about herself! What the fuck do I do? Let her watch me fail over and over and over again? No, that only works on bad sitcoms. The real problem isn't how Emilia feels about me, the problem is how she feels about herself! But what can I do to make her see herself differently?

Come to think of it, what could someone have done back home to make me see myself differently? Mom and Dad tried to reach me a few times, it just didn't work. I didn't really start to view myself as worth anything until I came here and I met other people who saw me that way.

Wait. No, that's wrong. Mom and Dad did see me as someone worthwhile, I just didn't believe them. I see Emilia as someone worthwhile, she just doesn't believe me. So really, Emilia is just... where I was before I came here.

Holy shit, Emilia. I am so fucking sorry! How did I let anyone I love reach this kind of low point of despair? Is this how my parents felt about me?

So what did change things when I came here? When did I stop thinking that I was an absolute loser who deserved to die? I mean... OK, I very often do still think that I'm a pathetic loser but... not the way that I used to. What changed?

Subaru thought about it for a bit.

Actually, I guess everything changed in Rom's loot house. I'd gotten Emilia's insignia back. I'd saved Emilia's life. I'd stood up to a monster that I so wanted to run away from. I almost died...

That's what did it. It wasn't that other people started to view me differently. That was nice but the truth is that I accomplished something that made me see myself differently. I really think that's the secret. Emilia needs to take action that makes her feel like she's accomplished something. But what can we get her to do? Completing the trials would certainly be a huge accomplishment and easily deserving of great praise but that's a chicken and egg problem! Emilia can't complete the trials until she regains her self-confidence and determination but she can't regain her self-confidence and determination until she passes the trials!

Where the hell does that leave me?

Roswaal said he thought it might be possible to give someone else the power to undertake the trials for Emilia. If it is possible then maybe I could pass the trials for her?

No, stupid! Are you kidding me? If you do that you can just sit back and watch Emilia's belief in her own worthlessness completely solidify! She'll be a shut-in NEET afraid to go outside like I was if I just take the trials for her!

The problem is that my breaking the barrier might be our only option. If the villagers stay in here too long, things are going to get violent. Reassuring everyone about the food supply is a good stopgap but that only goes so far. The Arlem villagers are living like refugees with no privacy and their fields and homes are collapsing while they're away. The Sanctuary residents feel like they're been invaded and their unwelcome guests refuse to leave. Even if food isn't an issue, these groups are going to start turning on each other. We can't have the villagers and the Sanctuary dwellers fighting. I might need to break the barrier for Emilia and then focus on helping her cope after that...

Fuck me! Fixing Emilia's despair isn't something that I can do for her! No matter how often I tell Emilia how much I love her and how much I think she can accomplish, that is never any substitute for real self-esteem. She'll just assume that I'm being nice to her! That I'm telling her polite fictions because I know she can't handle the truth. Hell, that was what I thought my parents were doing to me.

Shit. I really owe my folks an apology...

Maybe me just breaking Emilia out of here is the right answer. After all, if we get out of here, Puck comes back. Emilia will still be in crisis but at least we'd all be dealing with it together as a family. It might take years for Emilia to recover from the abuse that she's already suffered here but we can give her that time.

Felt blew out the candle and Subaru lay back in the bed with Beatrice cuddled against his chest. With his other arm he reached out and wrapped it around Emilia. Emilia didn't turn to face him but neither did she pull away.

Subaru stared up at the ceiling, his thoughts bleak. Sleep would not come for him easily tonight.

Emilia awoke the next morning but she pretended to still be asleep. She was turned over on her side still facing the wall. She heard Felt up and moving around.

"Felt, if you're going to go out for a bit, mind putting Beako on your bed?" Subaru whispered.

"Sure, no problem, boss," Felt replied.

Emilia felt Beatrice lifted off the bed.

"Oh and Felt? I forgot to say this yesterday: I really appreciate everything you've done here," Subaru said quietly.

"Well, I haven't really done that much, Subaru," Felt chuckled.

"You've been helping Emilia with the trials everyday and you're been soothing the villagers' temper every night trying to keep them calm. That's a hell of a lot of work. I thought you being out here would help Mili but I never imagined that Puck would vanish. Can you imagine Emilia having to go through all this without *anyone* here to help support her?" Subaru asked.

No one thinks that I can do anything on my own, not even Subaru, Emilia mourned.

"Seriously, Felt. I'm extremely grateful for everything that you've done here," He continued.

Felt snorted and Emilia imagined her blushing, "Give it a rest, boss. You're starting to sound just like Red."

"You say that as if it were a bad thing," Subaru replied.

Emilia tried to hide a snicker as Felt barked a laugh and went downstairs.

Emilia felt Subaru wrapping his arms around her and pressing against her from behind, "Good morning, Emilia," He whispered.

Emilia opened her eyes, "I guess I didn't fool you, huh?" She sighed.

"Hey, can't hustle a hustler, as my Dad would say," Subaru agreed, "How are you feeling?"

Emilia was silent for a few moment then bowed her head, "Subaru. I'm... I'm very sorry about everything that I said last night. It was inexcusable. You've never been anything but kind to me and I blamed you for my own problems. You didn't deserve that."

"It's alright. I'm just sorry that you're hurting so much," He replied.

Emilia sighed.

"Do you think you could tell me about the trial?"

Emilia closed her eyes, "Subaru, do you remember when I told you about the Elier forest? How the curse was something... that I did?"

"I remember."

"That's what I see in the vision. Every single day I get to relive that disaster. I break my promise to my mother to stay hidden at home so I can go wander around the forest. I bump into dangerous people and when I run away in a panic I lead them straight to my mother, putting her in mortal danger. Then everyone is running away and our enemies start to catch up with us. We... might have made it. We might have gotten away safe... or at least some of us might have. But I panicked and I lost control of my magic and I froze the entire forest solid. All of the elves turned into living statues... except for the ones that were too close to me when the curse was unleashed. They all shattered like glass from the cold," She said bitterly.

Subaru didn't answer right away, he just stroked her arm, "Emilia... how old were you when all this happened?"

"Mmm, six. Maybe seven?"

"Emilia, that's only a child. How can you blame yourself for all this?" He whispered.

"Because I'm guilty. Because I did it. How can I not blame myself for it?" She replied.

"How can you say that a child is guilty for panicking when she's being attacked? For losing control? That's what children do when they get scared."

"Subaru," She grumbled, "This isn't like I broke a wine glass running around the house! I froze hundreds of people in solid ice! Including my own family!"

"And we're going to fix that," Subaru soothed, "We'll get the dragon blood and cure all of them. You feel responsible for fixing your mistake, Emilia. That's who you are and I'd expect no less from you. But responsibility isn't the same as fault. You can make amends for something without considering it a crime. You had no intention to hurt anyone. You just lost control."

Emilia didn't respond right away, "Sometimes when your mistakes cause enough damage, your intentions stop mattering, Subaru." She rubbed her face, "And the damage I did even extends beyond the forest. Roswaal told me about the communities around the forest. They got caught up in my curse as well."

"What do you mean?"

"The area around Elier was once lush farmland for most of the year. When I blighted the forest the curse spread out

beyond the borders and cursed the land with an endless winter. The communities all needed to be abandoned and they become refugees. That was thousands of people, Subaru," She whispered, "Thousands of people who never did a thing to hurt me that I changed into homeless vagabonds."

Emilia felt Subaru's body tense, "Why on earth would Roswaal tell you that?" He almost growled.

"I know that what he said was poorly thought out but he meant it kindly. He told me that his ancestors took care of all the refuges and managed to find them other homes so I didn't need to feel guilty about them. Some of them even moved into Arlem and started over again," Emilia took a deep breath, "So this is the second time I've made these families homeless."

"Emilia, you can't blame yourself for what Petelguese did at least," Subaru argued, "If that was anyone's fault, it was mine. I'm the one he came there looking for."

"But these people are counting on me to break the barrier and I can't pass the test," She sighed.

"Emilia, you need a break. You're exhausted. You've been working so hard lately and I don't just mean since you got to the Sanctuary," Subaru replied.

"Do you really think so?" Emilia asked listlessly.

"Emilia, the night before we split up we spent three hours on our feet talking to hundreds of people! That was exhausting all by itself!" He pointed out.

Emilia sighed and sat up. She wrapped her arms around her knees and looked at Subaru sadly, "Subaru. That's what *you* did."

"Huh?"

"I stood there for three hours and I spoke to about a dozen people about our plans and goals. More people talked to Roswaal about faction's goals than talked to me, even though I was standing right next to him," She sighed, laying her face against her knees.

Subaru looked guilty, "I'm sorry, Mili. I had no idea."

"That's why Roswaal told me we needed to split up for a while. I just... I feel like I need to do *something* to help us get the blood. I need to contribute something that moves us closer to getting the cure. Roswaal said that if I wanted to accomplish anything myself and not just follow your lead I needed to establish myself as my own candidate," Emilia murmured. "Subaru... I'm proud to be your wife. I just... wish that I could be something more too."

Subaru sighed, "Emilia. Why didn't you tell me? This has been going on for so long for you. You must have felt so overwhelmed carrying this all by yourself, why didn't you just talk to me about it?"

Emilia laughed bitterly, "And what would I say, Subaru? 'Please stop accomplishing so much because I can't accomplish anything? Please stop everything you're doing and let me catch up even though you're doing it all for me and this is the only way I might one day make up for my terrible mistake?'" Emilia put her face against her knees again, "I'm pathetic."

Subaru was silent for a long moment.

"You know, Emilia, I was thinking about one of my classmates the other day. I hadn't thought about him in years. He was a lot of fun always cracking jokes and clowning around. We were good friends for a while. It was only when I thought back on it that I realized he was going through some really tough times. I never knew it but he was. I spent all that time with him and I never picked up on his pain so I never gave him the chance to talk about it. I really wish that he had just come out and said: 'I'm in great pain, Subaru. It hurts and being in pain is lonely. You don't have to fix my pain but please just be aware of it; acknowledge me, acknowledge my pain.'"

Emilia moaned.

"Your pain isn't 'fair' to somebody?" Subaru asked, "So what? Does that mean it hurts less?"

Emilia didn't answer.

Subaru took a slow breath, "Emilia, what happens when you see all these memories in your vision during the trial?"

Emilia shook her head, "What happens? I go mad, Subaru. I can't help myself. I just start screaming. I scream and I scream and I can't stop myself. And then I throw every ounce of magic I have at the monster, trying to obliterate it, trying to destroy it utterly. The disgusting creature that caused all this misery, that inflicted all this pain."

"Monster?" Subaru asked quietly.

"...The witch of the forest."

"You mean yourself, don't you? You're so overwhelmed with pain and grief by this trial that you're desperate to destroy what you think caused it."

Emilia nodded.

Subaru shook his head, "This wasn't your fault, Emilia. I know that. I'm sure Puck knows that."

Emilia flinched.

"Felt would agree with me and I'm sure Beatrice will say it's not your fault, assuming she ever gets out of bed."

Emilia didn't answer.

"Don't you think that it's time that you forgave yourself?"

Emilia looked at Subaru with a frown, "Subaru. If *you* had done what I'd did, if you had cursed an entire forest, betrayed your mother's trust, frozen hundreds of friends and family in solid ice, could *you* just let it go?" She asked.

Subaru chuckled ruefully, "I guess not. It's funny how we can forgive o-"

Subaru's eyes widened.

"Subaru?" Emilia asked with a frown.

"Emilia... are you going to take the trials today?" He asked.

Emilia sighed, "Yes. I have to. If I don't pass the trials, I'll never get out of here and I'll never save the forest. I want to do absolutely *anything* other than take the trials again but I have to take them."

"You see why I said yesterday that I was so proud of you for that?" Subaru reminded her.

Emilia shook her head with a faint smile.

"Emilia, would you do me a favor when you take the trial today?"

"Like what?" She asked.

"Remember how I said a few weeks ago that someday I might like to have a daughter?"

"Um, yes?"

"When you take the trial today, I want you to imagine something for me. I want you pretend that the girl you're looking at isn't Emilia. I want you to pretend as hard as you can that the girl is *our* daughter," Subaru said.

Emilia stared at him, "Subaru, that makes absolutely no sense. Why would I do that? How does that even make sense? Besides, would you really want your daughter to be a complete monster?" She grumbled.

Subaru gently lifted her chin and made her look into his eyes, "Please, Emilia? For me? Promise me, Emilia. Promise me that you'll try."

Emilia's eyes widened in confusion. She wasn't sure that she had ever seen Subaru more earnest.

Emilia hesitated, "What's our daughter's name?" She hedged, "And don't you dare say 'Emilia!'"

Subaru blinked, "Um... our daughter is named... Elaine," He said.

Emilia closed her eyes for a moment. "Alright, Subaru," She sighed. "I'll try to pretend that I am my own daughter, as little sense as that makes. I promise."

"Thank you!" Subaru breathed, wrapping her in a tight hug.

Emilia actually smiled for a moment, burying her face in her husband's shoulder.

Felt came back in the room, carrying a plate of food, "Anyone want biscuits?" She asked through a mouthful of food.

"Did Ram make them or Rem?" Subaru asked suspiciously.

"Rem."

"Awesome! Give 'em here!" Subaru said, grabbing one off the plate.

Subaru wolfed down two biscuits and Emilia nibbled on one.

"So, Emilia, are you about ready to head off to the Tomb?" Felt asked without enthusiasm.

Emilia nodded her head with a sigh.

"Come on, guys! Have some optimism! I have a good feeling about today!" Subaru cheered.

"Really, boss?" Felt's eyebrows rose and she regarded Emilia with new interest.

Emilia fought not to roll her eyes, *Oh please, Felt. You've watched me collapse every day for two weeks but as soon as Subaru says that he feels good about my chances, you assume that the problem is solved? I know that you're amazingly clever, Felt but you do have your blind spots!*

"So what are you going to be doing, boss?" Felt asked.

"First, I'm going to go talk to Ryuzu about getting the villagers and the Sanctuary residents together so I can talk to all of them at once," Subaru replied.

"Do you want to borrow a muzzle for Garf?" She muttered.

"Then I'm going to make sure they all know that I can pass the barrier and that our food supply isn't an issue at the moment. When we start to run short, I'll just run out to the nearest town and buy all the food I can find. We can hire people to ship it here. There's no danger to them unless they try to cross the barrier."

"Good idea! That should make everyone calm down!" Felt approved.

"Yes, it will be a rich full day," Subaru quipped.

Subaru coaxed a not-entirely-willing Emilia off of the bed and she stood up.

Something fell out of Emilia's pocket and hit the floor.

Subaru stooped down quickly and picked it up: A small purple purse.

A despondent Emilia reached out to take the purse back from Subaru then hesitated when she noticed that Subaru was staring at it in horror.

"Subaru? What's wrong?" Emilia asked.

"Emilia," Subaru whispered. "Do you remember where you got this?"

Emilia blinked, "Ram and Roswaal gave it to me to keep my insignia in."

Subaru just stared at the purse, "Felt," He whispered. "You know, I never really got around to asking you about Elsa."

"Elsa, boss?" Felt sounded confused. She could see from the look on Subaru's face that something was very wrong here.

"Tell me about your meeting with her. Word for word if you can," Subaru replied.

Felt thought about it, "Elsa, tracked me down the day before I met you guys. She told me that a half elf girl would be carrying a valuable piece of jewelry in a purple purse and that she would give me twenty pieces of gold to steal it for her. That's all she said really."

"Emilia," Subaru whispered as if talking to the purse. "Describe what happened when Roswaal gave this to you."

Emilia frowned and thought back, "Well, that morning I was going to go explore the market district. Ram and Roswaal came into my room and gave me the purse to keep the insignia safe. That's all."

"That's what I was afraid of," Subaru sighed, "I need to have a good long talk with Roswaal." He paused, "Emilia, Felt, please wait up here. If this gets ugly I don't want either of you getting caught up in it."

"I don't get this, boss," Felt admitted.

Subaru paused in the bedroom doorway. "Think about it, Felt," He said as he exited the room.

Emilia looked at Felt in confusion. Felt frowned and then her eyes widened.

"Oh how wonderful to see you, young Subaru," Roswaal said from his bed. Rem and Ram were nowhere to be seen.

"Roswaal, I thought we should probably talk about a few things," Subaru said in a neutral tone.

"Oh?"

"You know, Elsa was the person who brought me into all of your lives. I'm definitely ungrateful to her for that service but still; she was the trigger for all of this. Of course, Elsa wasn't going after Emilia for personal reasons. She was just a hired blade. I tried to figure out who could have hired her but then I decided that it was impossible."

Roswaal sat there looking curious.

"I mean, hundreds of people knew that Emilia had the insignia and dozens if not hundreds probably knew that she was out in the market that day. That's too big a list to narrow down. I was stumped!" Subaru admitted bouncing the purse in his palm, "But then I realized, I wasn't trying to figure out who knew that Emilia had the insignia or was in the market that day, I was trying to figure out who knew that Emilia had a purple purse. That's still a couple of people. But then it turned out that strangely enough, Elsa knew that the insignia would be inside a purple purse before you ever gave it to Emilia."

Subaru caught the purse in a clenched fist.

"Isn't that funny?" Subaru asked Roswaal in a cold tone.

"A clever deduction" Roswaal admitted, "You must have questions."

"A few," Subaru admitted, "To start with what were in those letters that you wrote to Reinhard?"

"Hm?" Roswaal asked.

"Yeah. After we killed the whale, Reinhard coincidentally got a message saying that the Black Snake was attacking the north near Elior forest. I let Reinhard go off to protect the people and ensure that the snake didn't damage the forest where Emilia's family are. I told him to meet us at the manor later. Five pieces of gold says that Reinhard was given another letter there. From me. And that letter told him to go a very long way away. Am I right, Roz?"

Roswaal smiled and started to applaud. "Splendid! Marvelous, young Subaru! You are truly becoming everything that I ever hoped that you would be. I was indeed the source of the false report of the Black snake appearing and Reinhard did in fact receive a letter from Fredericka at the manor which instructed him to return to Astrea land, by a route that would avoid him seeing the ruins of Arlem which might have made him suspicious, and begin preparations to introduce crop rotations in his realm."

"Wow. I didn't think that even Reinhard would fall for that. I need to keep a closer eye on the poor guy," Subaru replied, "Well, Roz, I guess that just leaves me with one major question left."

"Oh?"

"You planned this, didn't you? All of this," Subaru growled. "You deliberately brought Emilia here so she'd be trapped. She told me about how you've been encouraging her to strike off on her own, how you kept implying that she doesn't really deserve any credit for saving her people if I'm doing most of the work. You even told her about the communities she destroyed around the forest to make her feel even guiltier. You even deliberately went into the Tomb when you knew you were unqualified and told her you'd tried to do it for her so she'd feel responsible. All of it done with the intention of breaking down Emilia and destroying her confidence. You've been working on this since you met her haven't you?"

"All correct save for the last point, young Subaru. In truth I have only been working on sabotaging the lovely Emilia since I met *you*." Roswaal replied.

Subaru was silent for a moment, "You knew Petelguese was coming, didn't you? There was no meeting with the village chiefs. You needed Emilia to go to Arlem so that Petelguese could chase everyone away. I always thought it was weird that he would bother to chase after the Arlem villagers. He seemed to be single-minded to say the least. Why would he leave Arlem if he knew that the person he was hunting would come there? Was he chasing after them at all?"

"Alas, no," Roswaal said with evident amusement, "But no one bothered to question it."

"This has been your plan all along. You deliberately trapped Emilia in this place with three hundred angry, frightened people who had been driven to the point of desperation. You knew that she'd be separated from Puck while she was here and she'd be emotionally vulnerable. Then you pointed at Emilia and said 'she will save you,' to those angry frightened people, while the food ran short. All of this done to pile the pressure onto Emilia and to completely break her emotionally."

"Not a difficult task, I assure you," Roswaal admitted, completely without shame, "Your lovely bride sees the best in everyone. Except for herself, of course. Thus she never even suspected that I was manipulating her. The girl Felt was obnoxious however. I did not expect her to be here. If I had found out about her presence in advance then I would have tried to arrange an accident but after arriving in the Sanctuary that was far too risky. Ensuring that Felt did not suspect me of sabotaging Emilia took an annoying amount of effort. Worse, Felt's presence meant that Emilia's isolation was not absolute which badly limited my efforts. I had expected to be the only person here that Emilia could confide in. I had to revise my plans significantly."

Subaru shook his head, "You son of a bitch, you did all of this just to put Emilia in a trap you thought she could never escape from," He whispered.

"Truly insightful, young Subaru," Roswaal congratulated him.

"Thanks, Roz, but I still feel like I'm kind of lagging behind here. You were Emilia's sponsor. If you wanted her out of the selection so bad why didn't you just stop supporting her?" Subaru asked. "What was the point of hiring an assassin? Why would you try to break her emotionally and then trap her in the Sanctuary?"

"I have no care if Emilia is in or out of the selection. The matter does not concern me," Roswaal said politely. "I hired Elsa for one reason; to connect *you* to Emilia."

"Wait, what?" Subaru asked.

"I have been waiting for you for more years than you can even imagine, Subaru Natsuki. The Witch's Pride. The strongest card in any deck. The man who will see my dreams realized. I originally intended to inform you of this fact on the day that we met and clarify that you would be working for me from now on," Roswaal explained.

"What in the world makes you think that I would ever work for you?" Subaru hissed, "Especially after Elsa almost killed Emilia?"

"I'm afraid that you would have had no choice. As you said, I could have ended Emilia's royal ambitions at any time. If you at all desired to see her dreams of restoring the Elior forest fulfilled, you would have obeyed me," Roswaal replied.

"I can get Emilia the blood myself," Subaru pointed out.

"Very true, that was the first kink in my plan. You were not supposed to be a royal candidate. I was quite shocked when Reinhard informed me," Roswaal continued.

"What do you mean I wasn't *supposed* to be one?" Subaru asked.

"Forgive me, Subaru Natsuki, but don't you think you would make a rather odd 'dragon priestess?'" Roswaal asked archly.

"Reinhard told me-"

"That the actual word in the sacred texts is gender neutral. Yes. I told him that lie," Roswaal smiled. "It was a flimsy statement to be sure and one that would never stand up to the slightest bit of scrutiny but I had to say something! Otherwise Reinhard, slow as he is, and certainly his father would have insisted on a full investigation of the matter. And that investigation would have almost certainly resulted in your imprisonment and probable execution on suspicion of witchcraft. I could not permit this to occur before I had the opportunity to make use of you. I had not expected your Authority to find you so quickly."

"My *Authority*?" Subaru said a chill running down his spin.

I never told anyone about-

"The Authority of Pride. It has been looking for you, young Subaru, for centuries. The Authority of Pride is most finicky about its host. It demands truly pathetic individuals. Men who are desperate to cling to the mantle of pride because they find it unbearable how utterly insignificant they are when they cast it aside. The Authority grows stronger and stronger as its host gives into their desperation to be special; to be more than they actually are.

"I knew that the Authority would tempt you but I never dreamed how far it would actually go. It seems as if the Authority desperately wanted to get a grip on you as fast as possible. It corrupted the insignia and forced it to react to your presence, hiding the actual 5th candidate, and offering you the throne of the Dragon Kingdom of Lagunica for your own. Doubtless once you actually sat there it would have tried to offer you the throne of all the world and then perhaps of realms beyond. Pride is never satiated," Roswaal explained.

"I don't believe you," Subaru whispered, his legs unsteady. "I never tried to do anything like that."

"Of course not," Roswaal said with evidence amusement. "You are far too inexperienced and unskilled to use the Authority deliberately at this point. It simply responds to your unconscious wishes. For example, if its possessor were to be a genuine simpleton, someone completely unable to master even the simplest of skills or studies then the Authority might grant him preternatural brilliance; the ability to stun all around you with your amazing intelligence and deductive reasoning. Or if he were a frightened child too pathetic to even dare to leave his room and face the outside world, then perhaps it would grant him true invulnerability. After all, there's no need for courage if one is indestructible; but oh the accolades are sweet and you lapped up the attention of everyone who thought you were so brave and overcame all your fears."

Subaru's mouth moved but no words came out.

"But don't worry, young Subaru," Roswaal continued, "Your affinity with the Authority will grow steadily over time and you will eventually develop the power and strength of will to demand that it serve you. In the fullness of time you might even exceed Regulus! Pride is the first and greatest of sins after all. In the meantime, however, your pride will serve to protect you from reality: The reality that you are *nothing*. The reality that everything special about you came from a bit of black magic you were simply lucky enough to inherit."

"Black magic?" Subaru whispered.

"Yes, Subaru. An Authority is a form of witchcraft; the same power as the Sin Archbishops wield. You are Subaru Natsuki, the Sin Archbishop of Pride. Subaru the Witch."

Subaru almost fell down but he managed to catch himself.

"You have no idea the amount of frustration this fact has caused me," Roswaal mused. "For centuries I have labored diligently at my studies and become the paramount mage in all the world; second only to my beloved teacher. And yet I was never able to harness the unlimited power of the Authorities. I, who labored for centuries to wield such magic, was ruled inadequate compared to a boy of no merit whatsoever," Roswaal paused thoughtfully, "Although I suppose I can't begrudge you having power simply handed to you. The Gods know that was the only way you could have ever hoped to accomplish anything."

"Even if... even if all of this is true, that still doesn't mean that I'll help you do anything! You betrayed Emilia! Why would I ever want to do anything for you?!" Subaru demanded.

"Oh? I thought that you loved Emilia?" Roswaal smirked.

"What are you talking about? You don't have any power over Emilia! If you stop supporting her I will still win the throne and I will still get her the blood! I will help Emilia free her people! I promised!" Subaru yelled.

"Yes, that *was* my problem," Roswaal admitted. "If I had confronted you when we had first met, this is exactly what would have happened. So I needed to find a new way to bind you to my service. Thus I lured Emilia into the Sanctuary. You are aware that she can never leave."

"Emilia is going to take the trials-"

"She will fail," Roswaal said flatly, "She will never be freed of this place. She lacks the strength and fortitude to ever pass these trials. If you wish for Emilia's freedom, you will have to secure it yourself. She is far too weak."

Subaru was silent a moment, "Even if that were true, you've only outsmarted yourself, Roswaal," He said with a grim laugh. "I don't have permission to take the trials. My Authority or whatever doesn't let me do it!"

"My teacher could grant you permission to take the trials and free your beloved from this trap," Roswaal replied. "I will grant you the ability to do so once we have an understanding."

"An understanding?" Subaru growled.

"Yes. We will form a magical contract. You will dedicate yourself to following my orders and fulfilling my dream. In exchange I will permit you to free the woman you love. A generous offer, don't you think?"

Subaru froze, trying to figure out what to do.

The door opened behind Subaru and Emilia stalked into the room, her eyes hard as agates. Felt trailed behind her, looking scared.

"Hey, I told you guys to wait upstairs," Subaru hissed.

"So what?" Emilia snapped at him.

Subaru's eyes widened as Emilia marched right up to the convalescent sorcerer.

"I am *not* as weak as you seem to think, Roswaal," Emilia said firmly.

"Oh? The sheer number of times your little maidservant had to drag you back from the trials screaming and with tears running down your face would seem to argue otherwise," Roswaal replied.

Felt winced at being called a 'maidservant.'

"I will complete the trials," Emilia said quietly, "I will leave this room and go there right now. I will do that today, I will do that tomorrow, I will do that for as long as it takes me but I will never give up. Someone who I love more than anything taught me that refusing to give up no matter what happens is the real meaning of strength and I believe him. You have been lying to me since the moment we met, Roswaal and your favorite lie was always what a shame it was that I was so weak and helpless. That others needed to carry me on my journey and that I could never do anything to help fulfill my own quest. I plan to disprove all of those lies right now. I will break the barrier. I'll keep trying even if I don't know how long it will take."

"I'm afraid that I can answer that question for you, Lady Emilia," Roswaal smirked, "One day."

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"You have one day. I may have neglected to mention this: The Sin Archbishops are on their way," Roswaal shrugged.

"The Archbishops?" Subaru gasped.

"Yes. It appears that the instructions in their Gospels have changed. They have been ordered to come here to capture Emilia and then slaughter everyone in the sanctuary. I doubt that they are intelligent enough to even think of disarming the barrier before they leave so they will be taking a breathing but lifeless doll of Emilia beyond the border. Honestly, I expect you would prefer that. The thoughts of what they might do to a lovely prisoner such as yourself do not bear thinking about," Roswaal said.

Subaru was panting for breath, his eyes wide with horror.

"Emilia-" He began.

Emilia wasn't looking at him. She was staring at Roswaal with ice cold fury in her eyes, "I am not weak, Roswaal and you are a fool! You have misplayed this badly."

Roswaal cocked his head curiously.

"I listened to your whole conversation with Subaru. I was sitting right outside the door in *tears* realizing how stupid I had been to let you trick me. How I had let you undermine me. How I let you ruin all of those innocent villagers' lives just so that you could hurt me! I thought about all of our conversations together over the past month. You had convinced me that everyone thought I was a failure. You convinced me that *Subaru* thought that I was a failure. That he knew I could never accomplish anything on my own and that he was just staying with me because he was too kind to abandon me. And what *really* makes me angry is that I believed you!" Emilia shouted.

Emilia scowled, "I was tired. I wanted to give up. If you'd only held back for a few minutes before telling Subaru about the contract, I would have gone back upstairs to cry and feel sorry for myself for being so weak and stupid. I'm tired of all this struggling. I just want to stop," She explained.

"The people of Arlem and the Sanctuary do not concern you then?" Roswaal asked archly.

"They concern me. I want to help them, just not to the point of ripping myself to shreds to do it. I'm not a hero, Roswaal," Emilia said bluntly, "But Subaru *is* and I know for a fact that he will sell you his soul to protect me and all of those innocent people and I will *never* allow that to happen! *No* one will ever own *my* Subaru. I *will* pass the trials."

Emilia looked Roswaal straight in the eye. Subaru realized that he saw no doubt in Emilia whatsoever.

Roswaal considered this and then shrugged, "There is time, I suppose. You can fail one last time before Subaru and I complete our deal. Perhaps it will even let Subaru feel a bit better about himself. He did actually let you *try* to accomplish something before stepping in to save your worthless life yet again," Roswaal's words were completely casual.

Emilia flinched.

Subaru's face twisted and he nearly threw himself at Roswaal but Emilia put her hand against his chest. "I will succeed," She whispered to him.

"I truly respect your optimism, Lady Emilia. On anyone else, I might even have called it foolishness," Roswaal said, "You have failed these trials day after day after day for nearly two weeks. You have never even reached the second trial at all. And yet you now seem to believe that you can complete all three in one pass? Truly remarkable. Tell me, what does give you such confidence? Clearly your previously much vaunted statement of 'I will succeed because the villagers need me to' did not suffice."

Emilia looked Roswaal dead in the eye, "Because this time, Subaru needs me to."

***Chapter 9*: Chapter 9**

Roswaal stared at Emilia for a long moment. His face was expressionless but amusement fairly dripped from him. "Very well, please hurry up and fail so that Subaru and I can conclude our business. Time is pressing and you are cutting this close," He said.

Emilia turned to go and Subaru made to follow.

"No, Subaru," Emilia said, putting her hand against his chest. "You need to stay here and get the people in the Sanctuary ready to escape."

"Emilia..." He whispered.

"I *will* do this," She promised. She leaned in and kissed him.

Subaru held her gaze for a moment then nodded, "I know that you will. I have faith in you."

Emilia flashed him a grin and then sprang out the door at a jog.

Felt gave Subaru a brief salute and then chased after Emilia.

"Be of good cheer, young Subaru," Roswaal said philosophically, "At the very least, consider that by you rescuing Emilia from a terrifying fate here, you will complete her dependency on you. After all these failures, she'll finally realize that she can accomplish nothing at all without your assistance. With that, and the poor spirit cat having gone missing, I doubt that she would ever even consider leaving you, which I know is your own worst fear."

"Emilia loves me," He spat at the bedridden sorcerer as Rem and Ram entered the room from behind Subaru.

"Oh?" Roswaal grinned, covering his mouth to hide his chuckling. "Is that what you think? I fear I may need to revise my opinion of your intelligence and deductive reasoning. Or is this less a case of poor reasoning than an application of willful blindness?"

"What the fuck are you talking about, Roz?" Subaru demanded.

"No, no. I'm certain that you are correct. Incidentally, I never had the opportunity to congratulate you on your success with Beatrice, did I? That poor lonely girl who spent four hundred years all alone in her library. Did you know that quite literally hundreds of people have attempted to form a contract with her? Hundreds of men and women from all different races and all walks of life. Many of them were supremely accomplished and often invested decades in their quest; either to acquire Beatrice's extraordinary power or simply to soothe and comfort a lonely little girl out of sheer altruism. She rejected them, one and all. Yet she chose you. She formed a binding contract with you after knowing you for a mere matter of days.

"Reinhard van Astrea is the paramount warrior in all the world. There is no one else who even comes close. Nobles and kings from far and wide have competed for his service yet he offered it to you on virtually the very day you met.

"Felt is a street child with a pathological hatred of the nobility; she would as soon gut a nobleman as look at one for what they're done to her and her friends. She is a born cynic who expects nothing from the upper class but fair words and then betrayal. Yet when you told her that you wanted to empty the slums, she not only believed you she believed *in* you. She follows you as a loyal retainer and cheers you to all who will listen as a man truly worthy of the throne.

"Or even darling Rem whom you effortlessly persuaded to reject her own senses, that so accurately warned her of the presence black magic, and embrace you as a friend.

"My personal favorite was at the announcement of the royal selection. You are a foreigner of no name or known lineage with barely any understanding of the history and culture of Lagunica. Still you dared to approach the proud gentry of this land and asked that they bow before you as King. And yet, before the night ended, you had the entire nobility eating out of your hand. Several powerful nobles approached me afterward, feeling a need to comment on your remarkable presence, your almost... *supernatural* charisma. I was greatly tempted to laugh but I sensibly maintained self-control.

"And let us not forget the Lady Emilia, truly one of the most beautiful women in all the land, who fell head over heels in love with you practically at first sight!"

Subaru felt dizzy, "What are you trying to say, Roz?"

"Oh, nothing," Roswaal assured him, "I'm certain that all of these people were single handedly won over by your charisma, your passion, and your sincerity. Your companions clearly feel a remarkable loyalty to you, young Subaru. Where you lead, they follow; sometimes in the face of logic or even their own good sense! You do deserve much adulation for accomplishing so much so quickly.

"It seemed almost too easy, did it not? After all, the only other possibility is that each and every one of your 'friends' has been influenced by your Authority. That their respect, fondness, and loyalty to you is simply a function of a magical charisma granted by black magic run amuck. Remember, the Authority responds to your unconscious wishes and seeks to give you exactly what you most desire. And what did a lonely friendless loser want more than anything else in the world? Why loyal friends, a loving family, and a beautiful woman who thinks that he is a hero."

Subaru glared at Roswaal and for the first time in his life actually contemplated murdering a man in cold blood.

Subaru bit back his fury to focus on the matter at hand, "Roswaal, how long do we have until the cult gets here? Twenty four hours?" He asked.

"Oh, who knows?" Roswaal answered.

Subaru's eyes widened, "You said that we had a day!"

"Oh, a day until the Sanctuary is completely destroyed but the Witch Cult is not very well organized," Roswaal explained, "They'll be dribbling in here one at a time. The Sanctuary itself isn't going to be completely destroyed until just after sundown."

"Sundown?" Subaru whispered.

"Yes, that will be the *coup de gras*," Roswaal said.

Roswaal glanced past Subaru to look at the twins, "Oh, good news, Rem. It appears you were not in error after all. Subaru is in fact a Witch Cultist."

Subaru heard Rem's gasp but he didn't turn around, "That is a damn lie, Roswaal. I never joined any cult and I am absolutely not working with any of these freaks."

"Oh, can a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult be anything other than a member of the cult? You possess the power of the Archbishop because it was your destiny to do so. Your voluntary participation in any of their endeavors is completely irrelevant," Roswaal replied.

Subaru scowled and fantasized about crushing Roswaal's skull. Unfortunately, if Emilia failed to pass the trials then he needed Roswaal alive. "My destiny is a product of what I choose to do. And right now, I choose to go out and save as many people as I possibly can. I'm guessing that none of you feel like helping?" Subaru snarled. He didn't even glance at Roswaal, he turned to look at Ram who appeared indifferent. Rem's face was frozen in a mask of betrayal and horror.

Subaru scowled and swept from the room.

Subaru started back up the stairs to his room but he only made it about halfway before he buckled and fell to his knees, pressing his face against the wooden steps.

Is Roswaal right? Is my magic forcing people to respect me? To... care about me?

Why did Beatrice choose me? What could I possibly offer her that a million other people couldn't? Why did she want to be my sister instead of Emilia's? Or Rem's? Or even Felt's?

Reinhard was so impressed with my courage at facing down Elsa. But he's a trained warrior. He's probably seen thousands of examples of inspiring courage on and off the battlefield. What made me so impressive?

I always assumed Felt lied to the council for me because she thought she owed me one. Why? Because I gave her a couple of gold pieces?

Then I guessed that she was staying with me because I payed her to work for me. But the speeches she gives to the nobles and the peasantry about me are passionate and filled with idealism. They're not the speeches of someone who's just collecting a paycheck. Felt believes in me but why? What did I ever do to prove to her that I was anything but a well-intentioned bumbler? Or just another cynical liar trying to take advantage of her?

I remember when Rem and I were walking home in the rain. Rem admitted that she was wrong about me and she even burst into tears. I was so busy comforting her that I never stopped to think about how strange that was. What had I ever done that had convinced her? Saving the people at Arlem? Rem doesn't know about Indomitable's time restrictions, she probably watched me deal with the soldiers and just assumed I was invincible. So why would she even be impressed? An invincible person isn't risking his life. You don't deserve any respect or accolades if you pick a fight that there's no way you could possibly lose. She couldn't have been impressed by my 'courage.'

Fuck... that's it isn't it? I mean maybe Beatrice, Felt, and Red really did choose me. I mean it's possible even if it's

extremely unlikely but Rem? Her changing her mind about me makes absolutely no sense! I did nothing to convince her of my sincerity but one day she just decided that I was alright.

It makes no sense. It never made any sense that Rem would change her mind about you that easily. But if you unconsciously used magic to charm her... then it makes perfect sense.

And what about Emilia? Why would she ever choose someone like you? She's been miserable with you. She wouldn't even tell you how bad you make her feel but you do nothing but make her doubt herself and question her own self-worth.

God! I wish that I had died before I ever came here!

I thought I had a family! I thought that people loved me! But it was all just the magic. A filthy bit of black magic...

Can I get rid of it? Can I get rid of the Authority? I'd be a lonely friendless loser again but... at least I'd really know that the people around me weren't being influenced by magic against their will. I'd know that I wasn't poisoning them, corrupting them...

Actually yes, there is a way to get rid of the Authority, isn't there?

Wish for it. Roswaal said the Authority responds to my wishes. Wish to be the same stupid cowardly loser that you were before. Truly wish for that, wish for it sincerely and the Authority will respond. It would make you nothing again. Reason and Judgment and Indomitable would disappear.

Earnestly wish for Reinhard, Beatrice, Rem, and Felt to wake up and realize how absolutely pathetic you are and they will do so. Wish for them to stop wasting their time with a loser like you and they will wander off in search of more worthy pursuits...

Wish for Emilia to open her eyes and realize that Subaru Natsuki is the real failure. That no matter how hard he tries he could never be good enough for her. Wish for that with all of your heart and Emilia will finally abandon you...

Tears were streaming down Subaru's face as he beat his head against the stairs.

Subaru wept in sheer agony, sobbing into the steps. The rough wood ground against his skin. He wished it were rougher so that it would hurt more.

I can't do it... I just can't! ...I'm too weak to ever wish to be nothing again. To wish to be all alone again... Even if everyone I care about is depending on me to free them from the witchcraft I can't do it... I'm just too weak...

He cried for several minutes until he finally managed to calm himself.

Subaru took in a deep ragged breath, "I am a complete piece of shit," He whispered to himself.

Subaru finally pulled himself together enough to make it up to the bedroom.

OK, focus. I sure hope Beatrice has managed to recover by now. She's already slept for about fifteen hours and, frankly, we are all out of time.

"Beatrice," Subaru gently shook her.

Beatrice moaned, "What is it, in fact?"

"Beako, we have a lot of problems and no time to solve them," Subaru answered, lifting the barely conscious spirit out of bed and placing her on his shoulder.

"And what does that mean, I suppose?" Beatrice said, rubbing her eyes.

"The Sin Archbishops are coming here," Subaru said.

Beatrice stiffed.

Well, that certainly woke her up in a hurry. Go me!

"But... Regulus?" She whispered.

"Him too I expect," Subaru said. "Emilia is going to try to finish the trials. When she does we'll be able to get everyone out of here and get clear before Regulus arrives. We have to get everyone ready to escape." He said, moving quickly toward the door.

"But... what if he arrives before she finishes the trials, I suppose?" Beatrice asked in a small voice.

Subaru looked up at Beatrice and his frustration melted away. Beatrice might be a four hundred year old spirit but she was also just a little girl who was very afraid right now. She knew how powerful Regulus was and she knew that Emilia passing all three trials in one pass was a long shot.

Subaru slipped Beatrice off his shoulder. He knelt down in front of her and caught her in a tight hug. "We can't beat Regulus," He admitted. "But no matter what happens we'll all go down together."

Beatrice was quiet for a long moment, "Yesterday, Subaru fought Regulus to protect Betty. Today, Betty will hold off Regulus so that Subaru can escape."

Subaru shook his head, "That is not going to happen, Beako."

Beatrice took a deep breath. "Subaru can pass the barrier. If Regulus comes, Betty wants Subaru to go. Subaru will just distract Betty during the fight, I suppose," Beatrice sniffed and put her nose in the air.

Subaru held Beatrice even tighter, "Betty, I promised you that you would never be alone again and I mean to keep that promise. You are my family and we belong together. Even if that means that I need to die here with Emilia on one side and Betty on the other, I will not abandon either of you ever again."

Beatrice's eyes filled with tears, "That... that is stupid, I suppose. Subaru can cross the barrier. Subaru needs to run away. Subaru shouldn't die just because Betty dies... Betty has lived long enough..."

"You might be right but the truth is, I don't care," Subaru said, rocking Beatrice back and forth in his arms, "I'm a selfish man, Betty. I've worked too hard to find myself a family. I don't want to run. We're all leaving here together as a family or together we'll all die but I will never ever abandon Betty. I promised Betty that she'd never be alone ever again and that promise means the world to me."

Beatrice buried her face into Subaru's chest and cried. Subaru held her close and let her cry herself out but he was mentally counting the moments. There was too much to do and no time to do it.

I need to ask. I'm afraid to ask but... I just have to know... Was it really just the Authority?

"Beatrice... why did you pick me?" Subaru whispered.

Beatrice looked up at him in confusion, her eyes full of tears.

"Beatrice, you are one of the most precious people in existence. Everyone in this world would have moved mountains just for the chance to love you. What made you pick me?"

Beatrice stared at him as if he was speaking a foreign language.

"Subaru," A voice said from the door.

Subaru and Beatrice looked up and saw Rem standing there. She had her morning star in her hand.

Rem's face was expressionless, "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Don't play games with me!" Rem snapped, "Are you a Witch Cultist?!"

Beatrice looked up at Subaru in shock.

"No. That is not true," Subaru said firmly. Then he sighed, "But Roswaal did tell me that my magic power is a form of witchcraft," He admitted.

"Then *how* are you not a Witch Cultist?" Rem demanded.

"Because I'm not," Subaru snapped, rising to his feet and putting himself between Rem and Beatrice, "Because the Witch Cult and I are enemies. I have no idea what the cult believes in or what its members want but I know they run around killing people and that is something that I am altogether against! I hate to be blunt here, Rem but if Roswaal is right, then the Witch Cult is on its way here right now and I have several hundred people that I need to save and every moment I stand here talking to you is less time to do that. So where do *we* stand, Rem? I want to save the people stuck inside the Sanctuary from the Witch Cult. Are you with me or against me?"

Rem was silent for a moment. "You told me once that it's important to be sure that the person you're killing actually deserves it," She whispered, raising her morning star.

"I did say that," Subaru admitted.

Rem glowered at him. "Then just know that I'll be watching you. If you try to betray us, I promise that you won't live long enough to see the other cultists arrive," She said.

"Sounds fair, let's go!"

Emilia and Felt ran up the stairs to the Tomb and went inside.

Emilia approached a large stone orb in the Tomb and touched it.

"Good luck, Emilia! You can do it!" Felt told her as Emilia swayed in place and blacked out.

Felt caught her gently as she fell and lowered Emilia to the ground.

"You got this, Mili! We're all rooting for you," She whispered to the unconscious girl.

Emilia was lost in a void of pure white.

Face your Past, a voice proclaimed and the white landscape faded away until she stood in a tiny, round room. A small girl lay in the bed kicking at the wall.

There she is. The wicked little girl who begot all this suffering, who caused all this misery and pain...

Emilia scowled at the little girl. Her magic boiled up at her fingers begging to be unleashed. She wanted nothing more than to destroy the wretched creature before she could inflict anymore pain.

Emilia forcibly unclenched her hands and then forced herself to look out the window and clear her mind.

No, I can't lose control. I can't give into hate...

Oh, Subaru, I have to succeed this time. I must. I know that if I fail, you will take Roswaal's deal to save me, to save all of us. If you do that then I will lose you forever. I can't let that happen. Subaru, if you left me all alone again, I don't think that I could...

I must complete the trials. I promised Subaru that I would and I must keep my promises.

Emilia took a deep breath as she turned to glare at the girl.

That means that I must follow that wretched little witch to...

No, I promised Subaru. He asked me to pretend. Why am I even doing this? I don't understand why pretending this wretched sinful girl is someone else will do anything...

It doesn't matter. I trust Subaru. He wouldn't have made me promise if he didn't think it was important. He must have thought that it would help me pass this trial. Oh, Subaru, please be right...

Very well, you wicked monster. You are not Emilia, a deceitful cowardly little creature who betrayed her mother's trust and ruined everyone's life. You are Elaine. You are... my... daughter.

Emilia watched the girl roam around the tiny room, pacing in frustration.

My daughter... The one I might someday share with Subaru. He said that he wanted a daughter, he said that he wanted a child... just like me... why? Why would he ever say such a foolish thing?

The girl read her books and drew pictures on sheets of paper and grew more and more restless.

It's hard to stay inside one room all day. I remember that from all my studying with Subaru, trapped in the library from dawn until after dark. She is almost like poor Beatrice, trapped inside one room for all that time. Strange that I never noticed the parallel before...

It's not the same thing, of course. I mean... it's different...

A small ball of light zoomed through the wall and hung over the girl who let out a delighted cry. The girl smiled and used her magic to commune with the spirit.

Elaine seems so happy to have company. I suppose it does get lonely in here.

The spirit seemed to be asking the girl to chase it but the girl just shook her head gravely.

You should not follow the fairy. You promised your mother. You must always keep your promises. Promises are important.

The spirit weaved back and forth as the girl debated with herself. As the spirit persisted, the little girl began to smile.

Finally, Emilia watched the girl follow a lesser spirit out of her tiny house with a mischievous cry.

Emilia, you stupid creature! How dare you break your promise to your mother! Don't you care about anyone but yourself? Don't you know what you have done to everyone by doing this, you selfish little-

No. She is not Emilia.

She is Elaine... and she broke a promise to her mother. Elaine... you are... naughty.

Emilia followed the girl who was joyously chasing the dancing ball of light down the forest path.

This is home: The great forest. It's winter now but the cold isn't supernaturally bitter yet. The curse hasn't placed a permanent cloud cover over the land and it's not perpetually snowing. There are even living creatures in the forest instead of ice statues.

Strange. By now I would usually have lost all control and thrown a blizzard of ice magic at the vision, trying to destroy the little wretch; the wicked, selfish witch who caused so much heartache to so many.

Emilia walked behind the little girl as she danced and sang with the spirit. She seemed exuberant to be out of that tiny room.

All you had to do was keep your promise and none of this would have ever happened. This is why everyone hates you Emilia...

No. I promised Subaru. She is not Emilia. She is Elaine. Elaine, you are naughty. You must always keep your promises. Promises are important.

The lesser spirit led the girl through the forest until Emilia could heard soft voices in the distance. The girl had a devious smirk on her face as she began darting from tree to tree.

This is almost funny. She thinks that she's hiding but she's actually out in plain sight. Elaine is trying to be sneaky but she's very bad at it.

I guess Elaine takes after me... I'm terrible at being sneaky... When I try to be sneaky I usually wind up just making Subaru laugh...

The little girl crept through the brush and watched as two people spoke in the clearing.

Guese... and Mother Fortuna... oh, Mama. I'm so sorry...

The two people were talking but Emilia couldn't make out what they were saying.

Elaine... almost looks cute right now. She's being sneaky but the look on her face... It actually reminds me of Subaru when he's sneaking around being clever. Subaru is sneaky. He likes to trick and outsmart people but... there's no malice in his mischief. It's just a game.

Is this what our Elaine would be like? Sneaky like her father? Her mother was a wicked child broke promises and was very selfish but Elaine... might be sneaky as a game. Maybe she'd even want to be caught sneaking. Maybe she'd want to be caught and scolded just so her Mother would know how clever she was being.

Emilia turned to look closer at the adults talking in the grove.

Guese, you were always so kind to Mother Fortuna and me. I always knew that she cared for you. I remember one day I suggested that the two of you should get married. She blushed so much...

If the girl is Elaine, then... should I imagine Guese as Subaru? Subaru would actually make a good Guese. He's silly and goofy but always so very brave and kind. I can imagine that Guese is Subaru easily.

But Mama... Mama is so beautiful and strong and wise. How could I be anything like her? How can I imagine myself as Mama?

Mama Fortuna, I always wanted to be just like you...

Wait, Mama is afraid of something... She's talking to Guese about something and she's clearly upset and worried... I never noticed that before. I can't make out what they're saying...

Fortuna turned away clearly distraught and Guese tried to comfort her.

Guese is worried too but he's trying to be brave for Mama's sake...

I wish I knew what they were talking about. I guess I didn't understand what they were saying back then so I can't remember it now.

I've never seen Mama Fortuna look so distraught. I didn't think she could be afraid of anything. Did she try to hide her fears from me? I suppose that she wanted to look brave for my sake...

Emilia noticed the little girl was getting bored. She wandered away following another lesser spirit. Emilia followed.

Don't you want to know what's going on, Elaine? Don't you realize that Mama is scared? Or are you too young to understand?

Emilia followed the girl down the forest path.

Elaine is clearly delighted to be outside of that room and following the lesser spirits. She's so playful... but she doesn't understand. The forest can be dangerous, Elaine. Come back... You might... get hurt out here...

The little girl had now found a group of spirits to play with.

Elaine is very small... She seems so much younger than I was. I know that that doesn't make any sense. There is no Elaine.

This is just some kind of weird game that Subaru asked me to play. Elaine is me and therefore she is the same as I was; dangerous and wicked with all of my terrible magic.

So... then why does Elaine seem so terribly small and helpless to me...

"Well, what splendid luck," A girl's voice said.

Standing on the forest path were two people: A young man in a white suit with white hair and... a blur. There was a blur on the path about as large as a child and it was that blur who appeared to have spoken. It was clear from her

expression that the younger Emilia could sense their magic and it was terrifying.

"We've been looking for you for a long time, little one. If you would be so kind as to come with us, we can avoid a great deal of trouble," The blur said calmly.

Run, Elaine! Run away now! These are evil people who will put you in danger, you must run back to Mama as fast as you can!

Elaine pulled back, her face contorted in fear. With a scream, she raced back toward the clearing where Guese and Fortuna waited.

That's odd. I told Elaine to run to Mama. I always cursed the fact that I ran back there. I led the evil people straight to my family and put them in danger because I was a selfish and cowardly girl but... this is different. It's not the same as it was when I did it. Elaine is so small and helpless and she's scared. She needs to run to her Mama. Guese-... Subaru and... Emilia will keep Elaine safe. They're her parents. That's their job.

Little Emilia burst through the bushes crying out, bolting to Guese and Fortuna who quickly scooped her up in her arms.

"Mama! I'm sorry!" The little girl wailed.

Mother Fortuna is trying to comfort... Elaine. She's not mad. She just wants her daughter to stop crying and feel safe. Mama Fortuna is still scared, I never noticed that before but she is scared and trying to hide it. She's being strong because her daughter needs her to be.

Mama...

The strangers casually sauntered out of the bush.

Guese is stepping in front of Mama and Elaine. He wants to protect them. I can't make out what he's saying. He's probably trying to talk the strangers into leaving.

Something black and huge slithered in the underbrush, knocking aside trees. It seemed impossible that any living creature could be so big.

Guese made a gesture and Fortuna turned to run, carrying Elaine away.

Guese waved his hand and a brilliant flash erupted in the clearing. The strangers staggered unable to see but Emilia saw Guese spin around with his eyes closed and race away.

Clever. He distracted them so he and Mama Fortuna could get a head start. It's the kind of plan that Subaru would come up with...

As Guese and Fortuna raced away, strange men in purple robes began to attack the strangers and the beast in the forest.

Those are Guese's...friends?

The robed men were an effective distraction. The strangers did stop to fight them but the robed men didn't seem to be having any success actually harming the strangers. Guese and Fortuna raced through the elven village carrying the little girl.

Guese and Fortuna are yelling, trying to rouse all of the elves to flee. They know that we can't fight these strangers...

The elves began streaming out of their houses, not bothering to grab anything before they took flight. They followed Guese and Fortuna's wild escape desperately trying to get away.

Emilia raced after them, trying to keep up with Guese and Fortuna. The crowd of elves was far bigger than she remembered and Emilia didn't want to lose them in it.

The crowd broke free of the trees and began to stream across a vast meadow with a large hill in the middle that lay at the very center of the forest.

Emilia looked back and saw the great beast's midsection rising out of the forest behind them, a great, black serpentine shape that crested the trees like an enormous wave as it crushed the last of the purple robed men attacking it.

The fleeing elves were surmounting the tall hill in the meadow when suddenly the strangers were just *there* right in their midsts.

The elves all drew back, shivering in fear but Guese stepped forward again putting himself between the strangers and his family.

The little girl whimpered and Mama Fortuna cradled her, whispering to the child.

Mama is trying to comfort Elaine. Elaine is so scared and so is Mama.

Guese appeared to be making some kind of threat as he pulled a small black box out of his pocket. The strangers actually took a step back.

What is in the little black box Guese just pulled out and why do the strangers look afraid of it? I wish I could understand what they were saying but... Elaine wasn't listening. She was probably trying not to hear. To her this was just a dreadful nightmare that she couldn't wake up from.

Guese opened the box and something black and terrible crawled out. It wrapped around him like a strangling snake and then enveloped him. His body grew arms; many, many arms made of shadows that writhed and twisted like tentacles. Guese screamed in terrible agony.

Oh dear, Guese what have you done? This must be some kind of witchcraft he's using. He can't control it. It's hurting him, it's ruining him. Guese is... sacrificing himself to protect Mama Fortuna and Elaine.

Guese flung himself at the strangers, beating and clawing at them with his many arms but he didn't seem to be having any effect. Neither stranger seemed to be hurt at all. The blurry stranger gestured and one of Guese's shadowy arms went wide and reached behind him-

Where it tore through Mother Fortuna's stomach.

Fortuna fell to her knees with a shocked expression and the little girl was dropped onto the snowy ground.

Guese looked back at Fortuna with horror and the blurry stranger said something in an amused tone.

"Mama..." The little girl whispered, her face frozen in horror.

This is where it happens... This is where everything goes wrong... It was all because of me... We could have gotten away. Mama was badly wounded but she could have been healed. If I hadn't lost control she might have survived. I was so stupid and cowardly, it was all my...

Emilia suddenly glanced away from Fortuna and looked at the little girl standing before her; her eyes were huge and tears were streaming down her face.

...Elaine looks like she's in such terrible pain... Her mother's blood is splashed across her own face. She's so tiny...

The wound in Mama Fortuna's stomach is so much bigger than I remember. Could it have even been healed?

Guese screamed in misery and flung himself at the strangers like a man possessed but the man in white made a throwing motion and Guese was lifted up and flung far into the distance with a despairing cry as he crashed into the woods where the monstrous snake prowled.

Poor Guese. He never could have escaped from that monster. He died trying to save us...

The strangers were talking but the little girl didn't hear them. She was staring up at her mother in anguish.

Fortuna stroked her daughter's face as her body began to sway and tremble.

What did Mama say... I couldn't tell... I couldn't hear anything over the roaring in my ears.

The blurry stranger moved closer, extending her hand toward the little girl and the child drew back. She kept looking between the strangers and Fortuna's terrible wound as if unable to decide which frightened her more.

The little girl screamed in terror and the world erupted in blue light. A terrible wind swept up out of nowhere and buried the area in white frost.

The little girl kept wailing, unable to control her own magic or her own pain and around her... everything froze.

The strangers were buffeted by the magic. The blurry figure sounded annoyed for the first time but Emilia couldn't make out what she was saying.

The blurry figure gestured and then the strangers were... simply gone.

The little girl stared up in shock at her mother who still knelt in the snow; now a living sculpture of solid ice with a terrible gaping hole in the center.

The elves all across the broad field were frozen; hundreds and hundreds of elves reduced to living statues in a moment.

But for those few statues that were at the epicenter of the spell...

No...

The little girl looked up in abject horror as the ice sculpture of her mother began to crack from the bitter cold.

The child shook her head in furious denial and grabbed at the statue, frantically trying to hold it together.

Then the statue fractured into pieces and the little girl caught the effigy of Mother Fortuna's staring head in her own hands.

The little girl trembled. The world trembled around her.

Then she screamed.

The unleashed magic surged to incredible levels, inflicting cold on the forest, the likes of which could scarcely be imagined.

Emilia had to turn her face away as the magic flared with a brilliant white light. All she could hear was the agonized wailing of the little girl.

I can barely make out the words in Elaine's shrieks. She's begging for her mother to come back, to be alright again. She's promising that she'll be good.

Why is there no one here to comfort this poor child?

And then it was over. The little girl stood frozen herself, encased in a gigantic pillar of ice. Her face was contorted with pain and countless tears were frozen against her cheeks.

The forest was completely still except for the frigid wind.

This is where it always happens, Emilia thought, This is where I completely lose control of myself and throw all the magic I have against that freak; that monster who destroyed her own home, who murdered everyone who trusted her, who even killed her own Mother. The vile witch that should rightly be hated by all the world. I scream and I scream and I scream until it feels like my throat is bleeding. I scream until the trial finally ends and I can just leave this awful place...

Emilia stepped closer to the frozen pillar that held the tiny girl inside it.

Elaine... you must have been so scared... You're in so much pain... I'd give anything to be able to hold you tight and promise you that everything will be alright...

Emilia shook her head and although her eyes were moist she almost smiled, "Subaru, was this... was this what you thought would happen...? Subaru, you dirty sneak... You knew. You knew that... I could hate Emilia but... I could never bring myself to hate Elaine."

Emilia stroked the side of the pillar and pressed her forehead against it.

"Elaine... you poor wounded thing," Emilia whispered, her eyes filling up with tears, "What kind of ignorant cruel wretch could ever hate you? You were just a child. You were trapped in a horrible situation that you could barely understand. Of course you panicked. Of course you lost control."

Emilia wrapped her arms around her chest as if struggling to hold herself together. She began to shake as her tears poured freely down her cheeks.

Emilia fell to her knees with a despairing wail, crying loud agonizing sobs that tore at her heart. She wept for her shattered family, for the ruined forest, for all the people trapped under Emilia's own curse.

And for the first time, she even wept for Emilia.

Outside of the house, Subaru, Beatrice, and Rem encounter Garfiel and Ryuzu.

"Ryuzu," Subaru called, "I need to talk to the villagers and all the people of the Sanctuary. I'd like you and Garf to come as well."

Ryuzu bowed her head, "Very well then," She said.

Ryuzu walked away and Subaru and his group followed.

Garfiel leaned against a tree, kicking stones, "Why should my glorious self waste my time with you?" Garfiel sneered.

"Because everyone in the Sanctuary is in mortal danger," Subaru called over his shoulder. "I thought maybe you'd like to hear about it."

Garfiel scowled and begrudgingly followed along.

It was a long while later. Emilia wasn't sure how long she had been here but she had shed her tears.

She knelt beside the frozen pillar. The little girl was still trapped inside; her agony and misery captured clearly in the ice for anyone willing to look.

Emilia sniffed, "Elaine... I know that you're not really Elaine. Elaine... doesn't exist yet. She might never exist. But I need to pretend that you're Elaine because... I don't think that I could say this to Emilia yet."

She stood up and took a deep breath, "Elaine, this was not your fault. You didn't want this to happen. You didn't mean for it to happen. You did the best that you could in an impossible situation and that is all that anyone can ever do." Emilia wept but her voice was steady.

"I know that this will be hard for you to accept, it will take you a long time to understand it, but... you can't blame yourself for what happened here. It just isn't fair to you. You did not kill your mother. She could have never survived her injury, no matter what you did. She died because she was wounded not because of your magic. The important thing is to always remember how much she loved you and to never stop moving forward and trying to make her proud."

"This was not your fault, Elaine but it *is* your responsibility," Emilia continued; and had she but known it, in that moment she sounded very much like Mother Fortuna, "You froze these people and you must never stop trying to put it right. It will be difficult. The burden will sometimes feel overwhelming but that's why we have friends and family to help share the burden when it gets to be too heavy. It's alright to let others help you, Elaine. Because what's most important isn't that you personally atone for your sins or that you expurgate your own guilt, it's that you finally make things right for all the people that you hurt."

"It will be a long and difficult journey, Elaine but I *know* that you can do it. You're stronger than you'd ever believe."

Emilia turned away crying, "Goodbye, Elaine. I wish that... I really could have been your mother."

Emilia walked away from the pillar and the entire world vanished into a white blur.

Emilia groaned and opened her eyes. She saw Felt loaming over her looking worried, "Mili! Are you OK?!"

"Yes, I... think so," Emilia whispered, getting to her feet, "I think... I think that I passed the first trial."

"What?! That's amazing, Mili! Should we go and tell Subaru?" Felt asked.

Emilia shook her head, "No, Subaru is doing his job. Now I need to do mine," Emilia said reaching, for the orb again.

Emilia staggered and Felt barely managed to catch her before she hit the ground.

Ryuzu had gathered up all the Sanctuary residents and they were standing together near where the Arlem villagers waited.

The two groups were both looking at each other suspiciously as Subaru, Rem, Beatrice, and Garfiel arrived.

"Subaru!" Petra screamed in delight and ran over to wrap her arms around him.

"Hi, Petra," Subaru said, giving her a one armed hug. "It's good to see you again. I've been worried."

"Lord Subaru! Thank goodness you've found us," The chief said as he and a group of officials approached. "We fled Arlem and Lord Roswaal led us here when we were attacked by a terrifying monster. It's hard to describe it but it-"

"Don't bother describing it," Subaru sighed, "Beatrice and I fought it too. It's dead now."

Gasps of amazement ran through the crowd, "Lord Subaru, you were able to kill that monstrosity?"

Subaru barely hesitated, "Yeah, it's dead," He replied.

Ironically, this lie has nothing to do with my ego. If I told them a pair of Sin Archbishops had come to rescue me and they slaughtered that thing to protect me, I'd just derail the conversation for the next two hours and that is time that I don't have to waste.

Or I could just tell them that I'm one of these monsters. Subaru the Archbishop. The Witch.

Fuck me.

"We are eternally in your debt once again, Lord Subaru," The village chief said, kneeling and gesturing for everyone else to do so as well.

"Please don't," Subaru cut them off, "Really. For one thing, it's my fault that I wasn't there to protect you guys in the first place. Reinhard and I were off killing the White Whale instead of-"

"My lord!" The chief gasped, "You slew the White Whale?!" The entire group broke into excited chatter.

Subaru closed his eyes for a moment and counted backwards from ten. *For fuck's sake! I am not trying to brag here!*

Subaru put his fingers to his lips and whistled, "Please everyone! Stop talking!" He yelled.

Everyone fell silent.

"Thank you," Subaru grumbled, "Anyway, we need to get you all out of here. More monsters like the one that attacked Arlem are coming here and we need to evacuate the Sanctuary immediately."

"But, my lord, Lord Roswaal warned us that the barrier-"

"I know, I know," Subaru cut him off, "Lady Emilia is working on bringing down the barrier as we speak."

A low angry grumble swept through the crowd.

Gee, that sounds supportive. I wonder why Emilia's self-esteem is so low?

"If Lady Emilia is unsuccessful," Subaru added reluctantly, "I will do my best to break the barrier today as well."

This statement was met with much more enthusiasm.

These god damn people. Why am I trying to save them again?

"We need to prepare to depart in short order," Subaru said, "Please everyone begin packing and preparations to leave immediately. These monsters will slaughter *everyone* in the Sanctuary. This means that we need to bring everyone with us, both the Arlem villagers and the Sanctuary residents."

"Why don't we just stay and fight?" Garfiel demanded.

Subaru looked over his shoulder and saw Garfiel leaning against a nearby tree with his arms crossed and a sour look on his face.

"I've faced monsters like this before," Subaru said calmly, ignoring Garfiel and speaking to the crowd. "So have many of the people from Arlem. Most of us who did fight such creatures were lucky to escape with our lives. What is approaching us is not a single monster but a group of monsters, all bound to the same purpose," Subaru hesitated a moment, "They are the Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult."

Gasps of horror and whispered words of terror ran through the crowd and even Ryuzu gave Subaru her undivided attention.

"Please, everyone focus," Subaru ordered, noticing that even Petra who was holding tightly onto his waist, was staring up at Subaru in terror. He wrapped his free arm tightly around her, "I understand that you've all been through a lot. This has been a trying time for everyone. It would be completely natural to want to panic but you must not give into that fear! We are only safe as long as we all remain calm and work together. We need to start planning for a rapid exodus. I know that the wagons were cramp and crowded coming into the Sanctuary, they will be even worse going out because we need to take more people with us.

"I'm asking for each of you to think carefully about something: neither the villagers of Arlem nor the residents of the Sanctuary asked to be put in this situation. The same evil is hunting you both! This is not the time to cast blame. We all need to work side by side now and prepare for our departure. We need to travel light. The most important things to transport on these wagons are the people and food and our available space is going to be extremely limited.

"I know that many of you assembled here have treasured artifacts, items of immense personal meaning. I am asking you to make a profound sacrifice for your fellow men: if it can be left behind, *please* leave it behind! No item, however sacred to you, could ever be more precious than another person's life. We need to think carefully about what we can rescue from this place and the most important thing that we could possibly save is each other. We have a lot to do and very little time so please get ready *quickly*. We plan to depart by sunset tonight. Gather your provisions and stay close to your loved ones. Make sure that you all know what carts you're traveling in and that you're ready to leave at a moment's notice. We can not afford to leave anyone behind."

"Lord... Subaru was it?" Someone from the Sanctuary community raised their hand, "We have a bunch of food preserves at the Sanctuary storehouse. We could bring them here."

"Excellent, everyone please help this man to gather all the food you can," Subaru said to the entire crowd, "I'm sorry to be so blunt but if the Archbishops act here as they have in other places I've seen, I doubt that we're going to be able to come back here and salvage anything later so we should take whatever we can now. Chief, I'd like to speak with you and the village selectmen in private right now. Miss Ryuzu, would you please join us."

The chief nodded and accompanied by the town selectmen, a group of solid-looking older men and women followed Subaru and Beatrice away to someplace private. Ryuzu, Rem, and Garfiel followed them. The rest of the Arlem villagers and Sanctuary residents got busy with preparations. They were clearly afraid but at least for the moment they appeared to be willing to work together.

"Petra, go stay close to your Mom," Subaru whispered to the girl still holding onto him tightly, "This is going to be a rough day."

Petra nodded with wide eyes and vanished into the crowd.

"That girl should keep her hands off Betty's Subaru, I suppose," Beatrice grouched.

Subaru actually surprised himself by laughing.

They all gathered some distance away where Subaru was certain they would not be accidentally overheard.

"Gentlemen, I think we have a good chance of getting everyone out of here alive and safe," Subaru began.

The group nodded.

"However, we are all men and women of responsibility and we know that, like it or not, we must also plan for the event of catastrophic failure," Subaru continued.

"What is your meaning, my lord?" The chief asked.

"Emilia is currently trying to break the barrier. If she fails, I will do everything in my power to break the barrier and ensure that everyone can escape safely," Subaru said, "If *I* fail then we are out of options. The people will simply need to charge the barrier and take their chances," He said bluntly.

Gasps ran around the group.

"My lord!" The chief protested, "If we simply run the barrier then-"

"Roughly thirty percent of the people will die," Subaru said calmly, "If you believe Roswaal. Perhaps that is generous and fifty percent will die in the crossing. However, if the Sin Archbishops find you here, then one hundred percent of you will die. That is the math, gentlemen. It is cold and it is cruel but no leader can afford to ignore it. Fifty percent surviving is better than none."

The group all muttered to themselves in fear but no one contradicted Subaru.

"If I fail to break the barrier then I will stay behind with Lady Beatrice and Lady Emilia. We will make our final stand together in the Sanctuary and hope to give you all enough time to escape," Subaru said.

"But, my lord, didn't you say that you can pass the barrier-" Ryuzu ask quietly.

"I can pass the barrier," Subaru cut her off, "However, that is not going to happen."

"My lord, forgive me for speaking out of turn," The chief said, "But you are a royal candidate. To stay behind and sacrifice yourself for us is truly heroic but you have responsibilities-"

"Please stop, chief," Subaru was coldly furious with himself. He bent every ounce of his will onto restraining that fury instead of casting it at the completely undeserving village chief, "I want there to be no misunderstanding nor do I have the time or patience right now for anyone who could misjudge me as any form of 'hero.' This entire mess that both Arlem and the Sanctuary have been engulfed by is completely my fault. I failed to see through the webs of my enemies and I am truly sorry that any of you have been caught in the same net."

I never even suspected Roswaal of plotting against us. It never even crossed my mind. And the entire time he was playing me like a fiddle. He knew everything about me all along. He even knew that my Authority was manipulating and corrupting the people I care about...

"My lord, what are you-"

"Lord Roswaal is the architect behind all of this suffering," Subaru said bluntly.

Gasps ran around the crowd.

"He admitted it to me. Petelguese was never chasing you after you left Arlem. Roswaal lied and he led you all to the Sanctuary with purpose. He wanted to trap the Lady Emilia with three hundred angry resentful people who needed her to save them so that she would be forced to endure the trials every day. A trial that is nothing more than a form of emotional torture for her!" He snarled, "She tried day after day after day to save you all until she had been broken into pieces!" He yelled.

I'm screaming at these people. It's not really their fault that all of this happened but I can't help it. I'm not even sure when I made the decision to tell them all this it feels like it just kind of happened. I'm losing control.

Should I have told them about Roswaal? Well, it's probably for best that they know. They can at least try to protect themselves from him.

Bullshit. That's not why I told them. This was just the only way I could try to hurt Roswaal right now. I'm doing this out of pure spite.

Subaru the Witch.

Subaru took a deep breath and attempted to calm himself, "My staying behind here is in no way heroic; it is an act of pure selfishness. The Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice are unable to pass the barrier. I refuse to part with the ones I love ever again in this life; if that means I must remain here and die at their side then that is what I will do. I make no excuse for my selfish behavior but I hope that at least you all might profit by it."

No one spoke.

Beatrice whimpered.

Subaru shook off his self loathing, "We don't know who might be affected by the barrier if they are forced to go through it. We need to err on the presumption that the driver of each wagon could die in the passing. There needs to be at least one, preferably two backup drivers in each wagon ready to take the reins and keep going if the worst should happen.

"One more thing: Once outside the barrier I want all the wagons to split up. Regardless of how long I can distract these creatures, sooner or later they might come after you. Disperse and go in different directions. That will make it harder for the Archbishops to catch up with you. You can plot a new course for somewhere safe once you get some distance between you and the Sanctuary. Arlem is safe for the moment now that Petelguese is dead so perhaps heading back there with the Sanctuary residents would be best."

"We will see to it, my lord," The chief promised.

"This is a dark business, gentlemen. I truly hope that all of these precautions we have discussed for the worst case scenario were wasted effort but we must hope for the best and prepare for the worst. Our people expect no less of us. We need to stop talking now. We only have a few hours left and every minute counts. Let's try to make sure everyone gets out of here safely."

"Yes, lord," The villagers all bowed.

Behold the unthinkable present, the stentorious voice proclaimed.

The white world around Emilia dissolved until she found herself in Mother Fortuna's house. Emilia remembered it perfectly: A small cozy home where everything had its perfect place.

It's just like I remember it. It's actually better than I remember it. All the little details, not a thing out of place. The only difference from my recent memories is the lack of dust...

I tried to keep the houses clean for their former residents but I guess I'm not much of a homemaker.

Emilia walked into the house and thought she heard something as she approached the kitchen.

In the kitchen just ahead, a tall woman with silver hair was standing at the stove, cooking something and humming to herself.

Emilia approached the kitchen silently, her mouth hanging open.

Some instinct warned the woman that someone was approaching and she glanced behind her.

"Well, welcome home, Emilia," Fortuna said gently chided, "I see that you finally found your way back."

"Mother," Emilia whispered.

"I'm not sure why it took so long for you and the dodo to-" Fortuna continued.

"Mother!" Emilia cried out, throwing her arms around Fortuna and weeping out loud.

"Emilia! Whatever is wrong with you?" Fortuna gasped.

"I've just missed you so so much!" Emilia sobbed into Fortuna's chest.

"Oh, Emilia," Fortuna whispered, drawing her daughter into a tight hug.

Mother... Oh Mother, I missed you so much! There's so much that I have to tell you! So much that I want to say...

Fortuna blinked and drew back looking cross, "Emilia! You sneaky girl!" She scolded.

Emilia looked up at her through her tears, puzzled.

"I know what this is all about," Fortuna said brusquely, turning her back on Emilia and returning to her cooking, "You're hoping that you can talk us into doing this more often!"

"Yay!" Guese's voice cheered from the other room.

Fortuna scowled and took a step toward that room. "No 'yay!'" She shouted her reprimand.

Fortuna turned back to Emilia. "Emilia, you and the dodo made this decision yourselves. No one forced it on you and it is high time that you and the dodo spent a little less time gallivanting around trying to save the world and a little more time being responsible," Fortuna said firmly.

Emilia blinked, *What is Mother Fortuna talking about?*

Emilia heard Guese's heavy footsteps coming up behind her and she turned around. In his arms he held a tiny person who was barely able to hold his own head up but he was frantically trying to look at everything at once with abject fascination.

"Oh!" Guese whispered to the little person. "Look who's back!"

The baby noticed Emilia and broke into an enormous smile as the baby clumsily reached out for her, almost pulling himself out of Guese's arms.

Guese handed the baby over to Emilia.

"Oh my goodness!" Emilia whispered, her eyes filling with tears. The baby had dark hair and violet eyes. He seemed to be made of nothing but giggles and smiles.

Emilia held the baby in her arms and started to cry uncontrollably.

"Yes," Guese murmured, gently patting her shoulder, "We missed you too, Emilia. We're glad that you've finally come home."

"I won't say I didn't miss all of you, especially that little guy," Subaru said, coming into the kitchen, "But we were only gone for about a day and a half."

Emilia was crying uncontrollably as she cuddled the baby.

Oh my goodness. He's ours... Subaru's and mine. He has my eyes and his father's hair. He looks like his father but he

has my pointed ears and... they look so cute on him.

Oh my... I never ever want to let you go...

The baby had been looking at everything while he'd been in Guese's arms but right now he had eyes only for his mother.

She gently kissed the baby's forehead. "Whatever did I do with these arms before they held you?" She whispered.

"Well, sometimes you held me," Subaru mused with a mischievous smirk, "But you also hit me a lot. All in all, I'm glad that you're holding the baby. It makes it harder for you to discipline me when I say something stupid!"

"Perhaps you could consider saying *fewer* stupid things?" Fortuna grumbled, not looking at him. She stirred her stew.

"Hi, Mom," Subaru said fondly, walking over to Fortuna and giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

Fortuna flushed, "Don't call me that," She whispered almost inaudibly.

"Hey, Guese, what's happening, my man?" Subaru said, extending his hand. Guese broke into a broad smile as the two performed their elaborate handshake ritual. "I hope the little monster wasn't too much of a hand full."

"Oh no, Perseus was *very* well behaved," Guese replied, "It was a very easy round of babysitting."

"That doesn't mean we want to do it *all* the time," Fortuna interjected, seasoning her stew.

"Ignore her," Guese whispered, "She adored it!"

Emilia saw Fortuna stiffen.

"She held the baby almost the whole time you were gone! I only got a turn when she was cooking!" Guese said with a broad grin.

"Guese!" Fortuna snapped.

Guese blanched and immediately corrected himself, assuming the demeanor of a man attending the sick bed of a close friend.

Oh Guese... You always adored Mama Fortuna. The notion of making her angry made you tremble. Whenever we got caught doing something we shouldn't have been doing, you felt more guilty than I did.

"Well, I'm glad Percy didn't give you too much trouble," Subaru said, wrapping his arms around both Emilia and the baby, "He can be a real handful even if we were gone for just over a day."

"Really? Felt like longer to me," Puck murmured, flying in to perch on Emilia's shoulder. "Hi, Lia."

"Puck!" She whispered.

"Yeah, sorry I didn't come along with you on this trip, but I thought I needed to stay here and keep an eye on Percy. Don't worry, I won't leave you again," Puck said.

The baby gently tapped Emilia's face with a chubby fist and then started to burble and coo.

He wants my attention. Perseus is talking to me. He's babbling but I can almost understand. He wants his Mother to know about all of the funny things that he did with Guese and Mama Fortuna while she was gone...

"Hey buddy! Give me paw knuckles!" Subaru shouted as Puck slapped his paw onto Subaru's fist.

"Hey, Subaru, where's Betty?" Puck asked.

"Oh, she had a class to teach tonight. She's training the new recruits at the workshop on the proper way of shaping and charging magic crystals. I honestly feel kind of bad for them. Beatrice is the kind of person who should never be allowed to teach unsupervised," Subaru sighed.

Guese shot a nervous look at Fortuna, "How was the business trip?" He asked Subaru in an incredibly serious voice.

"Oh, you know how it is. It was mostly a waste of time. Anastasia blustered and tried to nickle and dime her way into a deal but I just told her: if she doesn't want my machines there are plenty of other people who do. Her resistance basically collapsed at that point," Subaru shrugged.

Guese laughed.

"Hey, what can I say?" Subaru shrugged, "Anastasia loves my machines but she sure hates paying for them."

"Is Felt coming over for dinner tonight?" Guese asked.

"Ah, no. Felt stayed in the capitol with Reinhard. She claims that she's going to investigate some potential new buyers and recruiting some more slum dwellers to relocate to the forest," Subaru snickered. He reached out to hold his son and Emilia gave the baby up most unwillingly.

"You sound like you don't think she'll find any," Emilia commented, watching Subaru lay his son against his shoulder.

Subaru looks like such a natural with Perseus. But the baby is still looking at me...

"Find any? I don't think she'll even look," Subaru snorted. "But I'm sure she'll be in a fabulous mood when she comes back. Reinhard has that effect on her."

Emilia looked at Subaru in confusion.

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Oh man, Mili, sometimes you can be amazingly clueless," He said, shaking his head.

"Does Rom know about this yet?" Guese asked.

"I doubt it and I'm certainly not brave enough to tell him. You should see him working the shift crews at my workshop. They're almost as terrified of Rom on the floor as they are of his drinking contests. I don't expect he'll find out until and unless Reinhard comes up here to ask him for his blessing," Subaru replied, "It's a good thing that Reinhard is invincible otherwise Rom would probably give him a very unpleasant afternoon."

"Oh, come on, Subaru," Puck yawned. The magical cat floated off of Emilia's shoulder, "Reinhard is a great guy. Why would Rom be unhappy to welcome him into the family?"

Subaru gave Puck a steady look. "I'm sorry, Puck, have you forgotten how *you* reacted when Emilia and I told you that we were getting married?"

"What are you talking about, Subaru?" Puck said, landing in Subaru's hair to get a better view of the baby, "It was obvious from the start that you adored Lia and you'd do anything for her. Why would I give you a hard time about getting married?"

"Oh, *really*?" Subaru snorted, lifting his son over his head to be closer to the magic cat. Puck stuck out his tongue at Percy making the baby giggle. "Funny, I guess I remember the event differently. Guese, how long until all those trees Puck knocked down grow back?"

"Gosh, Subaru," Puck replied calmly, "You make such a big deal out of every little thing."

"*Little* thing, Puck?" Subaru laughed. "I've seen tornadoes that cause less damage than you losing your temper!"

"Guese, Subaru, if you have time to stand around chatting perhaps you could both make yourselves useful by setting the table," Fortuna grumbled.

"Yes, mother dear," Subaru replied with a fond smile, handing the baby back to Emilia.

Fortuna sighed.

"Now what are you going to do?" Garfiel grumbled as the group left the villagers to their preparations. "Can you think of another way of causing damage to this place?"

"Don't jinx it," Subaru growled back. "I'm rapidly discovering that there is no limit to the amount of damage I can cause."

"Why are you trying to talk everyone into leaving here? This is a Sanctuary!" Garfiel demanded.

"Yeah? Well, it won't be when those freaks come through," Subaru retorted, "They're going to kill everyone, Garf!"

"Bleh. You sound like Riser before the fall. These freaks are going to have to go through my glorious self first!"

"Is that your strategy?" Subaru asked, struggling for patience, "Tell them *that* and hope that they die of laughter?!"

"Shut up! Everything started going wrong when you people came here!" Garfiel roared, swinging a fist at Subaru's face.

Subaru's patience evaporated and he triggered *Indomitable*. Garfiel's fist collided with Subaru's cheek and Subaru didn't twitch nor blink.

Garfiel gaped in astonishment. Subaru raised his hand and, with one finger, simply flicked Garfiel away like an annoying insect.

Under the influence of *Indomitable*, Garfiel went flying backwards landing at least forty feet away and skidding to a halt; unhurt but very much shaken.

"Garf," Subaru shouted, putting down Beatrice and slowly walking over to Garfiel, "I don't think I ever told you how much I admire your courage. And I don't just mean that you have the enormous balls necessary to think that you can court Ram. You've just been told that monsters are coming here to kill everyone and you never even questioned if they might be stronger than you. You've spoken to people who've fought them but you never even bothered to ask what their abilities and powers were like. You never even thought to ask how many of them were coming. There's a fine line between courage and stupidity, Garf and you have completely crossed over it."

"Shut up!" Garfiel said, rising to his feet and brushing himself off.

"I just took one of your punches to the face and didn't blink," Subaru said, completely aware that if Garf hit him again while *Indomitable* was still on cooldown he would certainly die. "I just knocked you halfway across the field by flicking my finger at you. If I'm scared to fight these freaks then why the hell aren't you?" Subaru demanded.

"Maybe because I'm not a coward!" Garfiel snarled.

"Fear is wisdom in the face of danger. Courage is doing what needs to be done anyway. Now if you have a strategy that would let us kill these monsters I am *very* happy to entertain it," Subaru snapped.

Garfiel hesitated. "I'll just snap their necks. I'm the strongest guy in the world," He boasted.

"Oh, man. We *do* need to get you out of here. You desperately need to get some perspective," Subaru muttered, shaking his head.

"You are no match for the Sin Archbishops, young Garf," Ryuzu said quietly, "They wield terrible dark magic. If you were to try to fight them, you will die and painfully."

Garfiel stared at Ryuzu, shocked by her pronouncement of certain doom.

"Subaru," Rem asked, "What do we do now?"

Subaru sighed. "Even in the very best case scenario we're not getting out of here until late afternoon. Unfortunately, Roswaal suggested that the Archbishops might show up well before that. We'll need to be in place to meet them if they pop by early."

"I thought you just said you didn't think we could fight them," Garfiel grumbled.

"No, I said that I didn't think we could *survive* fighting them," Subaru corrected, "But like it or not we may need to stall for time so that the villagers and the residents can get clear. If we're lucky the stronger Sin Archbishops won't show up early. Otherwise, we're going to be swatted like flies."

Garfiel crossed his arms, looked away and snorted.

"The Sanctuary is very large, Lord Subaru," Ryuzu murmured, "How can we detect an Archbishop entering the Sanctuary? We can't be everywhere at once."

"We don't need to be," Subaru replied, "Roswaal claims that the Archbishops are coming here because they've been told to abduct Emilia. So that's where they're going to come. We just go to the Tomb and stand guard until someone shows up."

Garfiel snorted. "You can stand guard at the tomb. My glorious self is going up to the lookout so I can see these bitches coming."

Subaru sighed, knowing he couldn't change Garfiel's mind. "Alright, Garf but just keep watch. If you see an Archbishop coming, don't threaten them, don't challenge them. Just get back here so we can all face them together."

Garfiel flashed him a grin that told Subaru he might as well have ordered the sun out of the sky for all that his instructions would be heeded. Garfiel bounded off into the trees and was gone.

"This is delicious, Mom," Subaru said, digging in enthusiastically.

Fortuna blushed a little. "It's just a stew."

"Yeah but your stews are always the best," Subaru replied. "Just ask Guese and Emilia."

Emilia was barely eating. She didn't even want to blink lest she miss a single detail of her family; alive again and happy. She plucked a very tiny piece of savory meat out of the stew and let Percy gum on it with relish. Puck meanwhile was perched on Emilia's head, making funny faces at the baby and making him laugh.

This is so wonderful. I wish I never had to leave...

"Oh yes," Guese agreed. "Fortuna is brilliant in the kitchen. Actually she's amazing in lots of rooms in the house."

Subaru snorted into his stew and covered his mouth to avoid spraying food everywhere as he laughed.

Guese turned bright red as he realized what he'd just implied, "Oh no! Lady Fortuna! I didn't mean-" He said, waving his hands frantically.

"Shut up, Guese!" Fortuna snapped also glowing scarlet.

It took Subaru a full minute to get his laughter back under control. "Oh man, I love my family," He grinned.

This world is perfect, Emilia thought, Mama Fortuna and Guese are alive. Subaru and I don't need to fight anyone for the Dragon blood. Everyone we love is here and safe and happy and Subaru and I can just be together.

"By the way Mom, how are you liking the new stove?" Subaru asked.

Fortuna flushed a bit and glanced away, "It works alright, I suppose" She replied.

"But dear, just last night you said how delightful it was to have a stew with no cinders in-" Guese said in confusion.

"Quiet, Guese," Fortuna said.

Subaru laughed, "I'm just glad you like it, Mom! I'll see if I can't make you a few more toys to make your cooking a little easier."

Fortuna sniffed, "So are you both planning to stay home for a bit? Actually *be* parents and knock off all this gallivanting all around the world?"

"Well, the gallivanting is important too, Mom," Subaru said without offense, "There's a lot of demand that we need to meet. The Elinor Forest has become the technical hub of the entire world!"

"I noticed," She murmured, "How much money do you really need anyway?"

Subaru pondered that question for a moment. "Not that much, honestly. It's not about money, it's about jobs. It's about making sure that the elves in the forest and the demi-humans in the surrounding communities all have good jobs and can afford to live well and take care of their families. I promised them all when they came out here that I would take care of them and I mean to keep that promise."

"Hm," Fortuna sniffed.

"It always amazes me how much you've accomplished in just a few years," Guese reflected, "When you arrived here you were the only human in the forest and you showed up with nothing more than the clothes on your back. Half of the locals thought you were either a spy or an invader. If Emilia hadn't spoken out on your behalf you would almost certainly have been exiled from the forest or worse. Even after Emilia persuaded them to tolerate you, most of the locals were openly suspicious. And you wouldn't believe the kind of things Fortuna used to say about you."

"Oh, I'd believe them, Guese," Subaru replied with a smirk, "She said most of them right to my face."

"And when you and Emilia started courting? Name of the Gods, I thought Fortuna was going to come over some night and ask me to help her bury your body!" Guese laughed.

"Well, Emilia chose me. To this day I have absolutely no idea why, but she did. And trust me it is very hard to refuse my wife anything that she wants," Subaru chuckled.

I know that I need to finish this trial but... couldn't I stay here... just a little while longer? I'll never be this happy again.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Guese said, "Another small caravan came by yesterday. They'd heard about you and how the forest was a safe place for elves and demi-humans. They were hoping that you could find them work and a place to stay."

Subaru frowned. "Hm. Well, we're getting spread a little bit thin right now. We're in between work orders," He mused dubiously. Then he smiled, "Oh, heck with it! We'll squeeze them in somewhere!"

"You already have a workshop crammed full of elves," Guese chuckled.

"I know. I just need a red suit and some reindeer now," Subaru replied.

"Pardon?" Guese asked.

"It's a holiday from my world, although not technically from my homeland. It's fun though! I think I might just introduce it here this winter," Subaru mused.

"How far is this going to go, Subaru?" Fortuna asked, "Will you be satisfied just saving the forest or does your ego demand that you save the entire world?"

"Oh, the world, definitely! I really want little Perseus to be proud of me," Subaru said waving at his baby.

"Have you ever considered cleaning up your home then? My grandson lives in a cottage where the housekeeping style suggests that there was a violent struggle," Fortuna grumbled.

"Honestly, I think it's a big improvement, Mom," Subaru replied, "Before Mili forced me to move my workshop out of the house, the housekeeping style usually suggested that there had been an explosion!"

"Yes, and there usually had been," Fortuna said, "We all thought it was a fantastic idea to move your workshop to the far end of the forest."

"I know, right? Can you believe how big my workshop has gotten and how many other people are working with me now? If it was still connected to our cottage my workshop would have enveloped the house by now!" Subaru laughed.

"Actually I'm referring to all the explosions you cause when you're tinkering around," Fortuna said.

"It took the elves quite a while to accept that you weren't really practicing some sort of fiendish black magic in there," Guese agreed, "Also just imagine Perseus trying to nap through all that noise! He gets cranky when he doesn't take a nap."

"Also I still can't believe that you talked Emilia into accepting that name," Fortuna said shaking her head.

"What? Perseus was one of my favorite constellations. Also it was a great story. He's everything I want my son to be: brave, resourceful, clever, and completely devoted to his mother," Subaru replied.

"Subaru told me the story once," Guese informed Fortuna, "It was actually very interesting. It was about some woman

with snakes for fingers whose breath was so terrible that it could turn living things to stone."

"Well, something like that I guess," Subaru muttered as Fortuna looked baffled.

Guese and Mama Fortuna are living together. That's wonderful. I always knew that they'd make the perfect couple. They must have started courting when I moved in with Subaru. Mama Fortuna would have told him to move in because she needed another pair of hands to do chores around the house now that I was me gone. She'd never admit that she just wanted Guese to be around more often.

"Are you still trying to buy the land around Elio from Roswaal?" Fortuna asked.

"Yeah. He seems amenable. He's driving a hard bargain but I want to have control of the region just so I can make sure that I can protect it," Subaru answered. "Gusteko has been flexing its muscles lately and the royal court made it clear to me that they consider the Elio Forest to be a buffer zone that would occupy the Gustekan army's attention for a few weeks before they can attack 'anyone of importance,'" He grumbled.

"What does that have to do with buying the area?" Guese asked.

Subaru chewed for a moment looking awkward. "I've been... experimenting with some weapon designs in my spare time. To make sure that if people come around here looking for a fight, we can kick them to the curb. But I need to keep control of these weapons, I'm not willing to just hand them over to the Kingdom. These should be weapons of defense. If I give them to the kingdom they'll immediately start planning to conquer the whole continent."

"That does sound like them," Fortuna admitted, "It's good to see that you're finally looking after things closer to home for a change. A married man and a Father needs to put down some roots. I'll expect to see you both over here for dinner much more often."

Oh, Mama Fortuna loves Subaru! She won't admit it but she adores him. She loves her grandson. Guese and Mama Fortuna, Puck and Beatrice, they're all here to share every moment with Subaru and me. Why can't I have this in real life?!

"So should I practice calling you 'Lord,' Subaru?" Guese chuckled.

"Guese, if you ever call me 'lord' I will braid all your fingers and toes together," Subaru grumbled, "I have way too much responsibility already. I just want to spend some time with my wife and son."

Yes... all we need is a quiet life together. That's all I need to be happy. Why couldn't we just ask for the blood and someone would give it to us because we need it? Why can't we just come back here? Why do we need to fight for the throne? Why do we have to be the ones to try and solve everyone's problems?

"I thought people were already calling you 'lord,'" Fortuna commented, "Most of the locals have decided that you walk on water."

"Not me, Emilia!" Subaru disagreed, "I'm just running a business here. Emilia is the one who's been running all over the place convincing humans and demi-humans to get along. At first when we started moving the slum denizens into the wood I thought the humans and elves were going to kill each other. Then Emilia started preaching her message of brotherhood and cooperation and everyone calmed down. Half the time I'm afraid to take a walk outside with Emilia; nine times out of ten someone is going to come running up and beg Emilia to settle a dispute before blood gets shed."

Fortuna smiled. "Well, she is my niece," She said proudly.

"You think she's popular up here?" Subaru asked, "You should see what it's like down in the capitol. Sometimes when we visit it's like an impromptu parade. And Emilia was amazing at the castle yesterday. She addressed the entire court to lobby for the reform and repeal of all the human centric laws in Lagunica. She got a standing ovation when she finished and it looks like the law is going to pass by acclamation. Plus she was the one leading the initiative to get everyone out of the slums," Subaru added, "Those folks have come close to opening the First Church of Emilia. I had to speak with them quite sternly about that."

"Sternly?" Guese asked.

"Yeah! She's my wife! The only one who gets to worship her awesomeness is me!" Subaru declared.

Guese laughed.

"The good news is that I don't think Emilia and I will need to leave here for quite some time now," Subaru continued. "I made all the preparations I need for a bit so we can just stay here and play with our baby. Everything we could possibly want is right here. We can forget about the outside world for a while; let those folks deal with their own messes. They're not our problem."

Emilia closed her eyes tight and bit her lip until she thought it might bleed, "Subaru, you dummy!" She whispered.

Subaru would never say that. Why did this Subaru say it?

Because he's not the real Subaru. Nothing here is real. It's a beautiful, wonderful dream and that's all it is. Why did this Subaru have to open his mouth? Why couldn't he just let me pretend?

Subaru would never say that; not in a million years. He'd be disappointed in me if I ever said it.

Wait a second. He would be disappointed in me if I said that. I know that he would!

I told him last night that the reason that he could never be disappointed in me was because he expected nothing from me but that wasn't true. He... He expects me to care, to try. When I told him this morning that I didn't want to take the trials anymore but I was going to do it anyway. He was proud of me. I saw it in his eyes.

Subaru kept saying that all he expected from me was to try and I dismissed him. I thought he was just being nice so he wouldn't hurt my feelings; just being kind, sweet Subaru. But he told me the truth. That is what Subaru respects: Trying. Just trying.

I always thought that how hard you tried was meaningless if you ultimately failed but Subaru doesn't see it that way. He is proud of me! I thought that everyone considered me a failure but Subaru was proud of me just because I kept trying!

Subaru believes in me. He believes that I can save everyone in the Sanctuary, that I can even save him. I can't let Subaru down. I can't just keep being a helpless girl. It's finally my turn to save Subaru.

Emilia handed Perseus to Subaru and stood up from the table.

"I'm sorry but I need to go now," She whispered.

"Go?" Fortuna asked in surprise, "Go where?"

"I may not know anything about being a hero but you and Subaru have taught me a lot about taking care of the people that I love. Those people need me right now. *Subaru* needs me. That's why I have to leave," Emilia repeated, stepping away from the table and starting to walk toward the door.

"Leave?! Hey- Emilia, wait!" Subaru cried, putting the baby against his shoulder and racing after Emilia.

"Mili, where are you going?" Subaru demanded.

"I have to go. I can't be here, not yet," Emilia said simply.

"Emilia, that doesn't make any sense!" Subaru protested, "Why would you want to leave? Everything we could ever want is here!"

"Yes," Emilia agreed, "Everything except you."

"Huh?" Subaru replied.

"Don't worry, Subaru. I'll be back. I'll be here again but the next time, we'll get here together," Emilia promised.

"Why would- Emilia, what the hell are you even talking about? I mean, it's the story of my life with you but why are you trying to make things more difficult for yourself than they have to be? Are you really willing to just walk away from me? From our son? Even if you could somehow get back here again would everyone still be here?" Subaru demanded.

"No," Emilia said simply, tears streaming down her face. "Everyone won't be here. I've accepted that. Every step I take away from this place is killing me inside. When I finally make my way back here it won't be the same, it won't be as good. Mama Fortuna and Guese won't be able to be here with me. Maybe even Perseus can't be here."

"Then why-" Subaru begged.

"But *you'll* really be here with me next time, Subaru," Emilia said, smiling sweetly. She touched his chest as her tears kept falling, "And that's what's most important."

Emilia tasted the tears flowing down her face as made her way to the door without looking back.

Perseus started to cry in his father's arms as Emilia walked out the door.

"Emilia? Emilia!" Subaru cried as the world dissolved to white.

Garfiel came flying out of the trees and landed on his back in front of the Tomb with terrific crash. A short, painfully thin figure leaped after him.

"Garf!" Subaru shouted, running over to him. Subaru saw the leaping figure pull out a dagger on a chain and throw it at Garfiel's prone body but Subaru got in between them and triggered *Indomitable*.

The dagger bounced off Subaru harmlessly. He grabbed the chain and tried to pull the figure in but apparently *Indomitable* didn't increase his strength this way and the twisted figure quickly recovered.

"Garf! You alright?," Subaru asked, standing guard over him as Garfiel regained his feet.

"Fine," He snapped although his body was covered in wounds. "I'm like Moris at Dromund Ka."

"Who are you?" Subaru asked the twisted figure, "Are you... Lye?"

The figure paused and shifted from a combat posture for a moment. He had the same emaciated body, long stringy hair and the same maw full of sharp teeth. "You know my brother?" He asked.

"Well... we've met," Subaru replied.

The figure put a finger in his mouth thoughtfully. "You must be the one that we're not supposed to kill. Or the one that we *weren't* supposed to kill, anyway. You should have followed the Gospel's direction. I'm Roy Alphard, a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult representing gluttony."

Shit. Rem is going to have a lot of questions about the Archbishops being told not to kill me, for whatever reason, but it sounds like my immunity has run out.

"Roy, I have no idea what the hell you're talking about, nor do I care. Rem, see if you can heal Garf," Subaru instructed, not taking his eyes off Roy.

"Look, I'm getting hungry. It would really be best if you'd just tell me where the elf is," Roy said.

***Chapter 10*: Chapter 10**

"Sorry, buddy but Ryuzu is staying with us," Subaru quipped. "She is very cute. I understand you wanting one of your own but we staked a prior claim."

"I suppose I could go with him if it made them leave the Sanctuary alone," Ryuzu shrugged.

"No!" Garfield barked.

"Yeah, we couldn't let you do that, Ryuzu," Subaru agreed. "If you weren't around I might have to take care of Garf and that's a *lot* of work."

"Oh, shut up!" Garf growled.

Roy was staring at Subaru, "Are you people confused or stupid?"

"Neither one, Roy," Subaru said as if speaking to a child. "We're making fun of you because we think that you're too dumb to figure it out."

Garfiel laughed.

Roy shook his head, looking annoyed.

"So we ready to step on this bug?" Garfiel asked, slamming his fists together. "I'm down for a rematch! I feel like Jacob and Rough Riders."

Roy looked a bit uncomfortable. "Actually, do we really have to fight? It just seems pretty pointless, you know? I don't think that I can eat you for some reason and even I'm not hungry enough to eat him," Roy pointed at Garfiel, "So fighting just seems like a waste of time. I'm really only here for the half-elf."

"Yeah, that's *not* going to happen," Subaru replied.

Roy sighed, "This is so annoying," He muttered.

A sound came from overhead like the beating of heavy wings. Subaru looked up and his jaw dropped. A massive black dragon circled the Tomb far overhead.

"Oh no," Roy muttered.

As Subaru watched, the dragon dove straight toward the ground and then... shrunk in on itself. The dragon seemed to liquefy and flow until it crashed to the ground near Roy as a massive pile of black sludge. The sludge flowed back together and then reshaped itself into a short girl with blond hair.

She looks kind of cute. Her outfit is ridiculous though: legging, hot pants and a bikini? She looks sort of like Felt actually, right down to sharing the same red eyes but Felt's eyes shine with intelligence. This girl's eyes blaze with a lunatic zeal. I get the funny impression that I'm not going to like this girl too much.

"Well, look who we have here: Scabies!" The girl cackled at Roy.

"Capella, could you be like *anywhere* else right now?" Roy sighed.

"Sorry, Scabies, I got my instructions same as you: Grab the elf. So you can just go and fuck yourself," Capella answered.

"And who precisely is giving you these orders?" Subaru called, "I feel like that would be useful to know."

"Oh. Are you 'that' guy?" Capella asked, sounding barely curious.

"You'd be surprised how many people have asked me some variation of that question," Subaru replied.

"Our Gospels told us to capture the elf girl so that's exactly what we're going to do," Roy shrugged.

"Oh, wonderful. I'm dealing with religious zealots. That's always fun," Subaru mocked.

"Zealots indeed," Roswaal said, walking over toward the tomb with Ram at his side. The sorcerer seemed to be out of

bed none the worse for wear and he was quickly stripping off his elaborate bandages.

"Roz, what are you doing here?" Subaru asked suspiciously.

"Why I simply thought that you might wish to accept some assistance in this conflict, young Subaru," Roswaal replied.

"Why?"

"Hm. Because you are hopelessly outmatched and have no choice?" Roswaal replied.

"No, Roz. I'm asking why *you* want to help *me*," Subaru grumbled.

"Hm? Oh, joyous tidings, young Subaru. Your signing of the slave contract is no longer necessary," Roswaal replied.

Subaru blinked. *Wait what?*

"My own Gospel has informed me that during this battle you will learn something that shall make us into faithful allies!" Roswaal explained.

What?! Now Roswaal is into this Gospel prophecy bullshit too? Why would I ever help him do anything? Why would he- You know what, fuck it! I have bigger problems to deal with right now.

"Fine, great, whatever," Subaru grumbled.

OK, we need a plan. Capella seems like the really dangerous one. Little as I like to admit it, Roswaal is probably my best bet for fending her off. Maybe if I get lucky they'll both kill each other in the fight. That's a happy thought.

He'll need backup. Ram wouldn't leave his side if I asked her to so let's give him Ryuzu and Rem to help hold Capella off. I think that Garfiel, Beatrice, and I can deal with Roy. Beatrice is weak but her magic is still potent and Garfiel is a powerful if unskilled fighter. Put that together with Indomitable and I bet we can handle him.

"Rem, why don't you and Ryuzu go and help Roswaal and Ram deal with the girl. The rest of us will take care of Roy," Subaru said.

"A reasonable strategy," Roswaal agreed.

"So I get to play with you creeps?" Capella asked. "Works for me!" She yelled, rushing toward Roswaal and Ram who fell back into the nearby meadow.

Ryuzu sped off in pursuit.

"Garf, do exactly as Subaru instructs," Rem instructed him, "Or I'll tell my sister about what I caught you doing the other day."

Rem chased after Ryuzu and Garfiel turned bright red.

Subaru sighed at Garfiel, "I don't *even* want to know."

Garfiel snarled at him. "So what's the plan..., *Captain*," He snorted.

"Subaru!" Emilia called from behind him.

Subaru jumped and spun around to see an exhausted Emilia and Felt coming down the stairs.

"I completed the second trial!" She cheered.

Subaru spun back to face Roy but the Archbishop had already leapt straight over Subaru's head and toward Emilia and Felt. He was within a fingernail's reach of grabbing her when Garfiel and Subaru both grabbed him by his ankles and flung him away. Roy crashed into the ground and bounced away.

"Emilia! The Archbishops are here! We need to break the barrier now!" Subaru shouted.

Emilia nodded and raced back up the stairs.

"Felt! Go and warn the villagers to be ready to leave as soon as the barrier is broken. Then find us some transportation: a wagon, a cart, I don't care just find us something that we can escape in and bring it back here!" Subaru yelled.

Felt had bolted away and around the corner almost before Subaru finished talking.

"Come on!" Roy complained, licking some blood off his hands with a long lizard-like tongue, "My Gospel tells me that I need to get the girl!"

"Oh, really?" Subaru growled as Beatrice scrambled over to the tomb steps and climbed up them. Betty stood on the steps preparing her magic while Subaru stepped forward to stand shoulder to shoulder with Garfiel on the ground. "Well my 'Gospel' says that I'm not moving. And *you're* not getting past me!" He shouted.

Roy rolled his eyes, "This is so annoying!" He complained.

Roy flung his knife chain at Garfiel but Subaru stepped in front of him absorbing the hit harmlessly while Garfiel sprang

after Roy.

Let's try a new strategy, Subaru thought stomping his foot on the chain as Roy leapt away. The chain went taunt as if Roy had tethered himself to a mountain and Roy crashed down onto the ground where Garfiel punched him full in the face.

Roy went flying but by now *Indomitable* had run out and the chain was jerked out from under Subaru's foot.

Twenty five seconds until Indomitable is back, Subaru thought.

Roy hit the ground rolling.

"Garf! Stay close!" Subaru instructed.

Garfiel shot Subaru an annoyed look but he obediently moved backwards until he stood beside Subaru again.

"We're never going to pin him down if we don't go after him," Garfiel grumbled.

"We're not trying to pin him down," Subaru replied, "The goal isn't to kill Roy, it's to stall until the barrier breaks."

Roy got up wiping blood from his mouth and there was rolling fury in his eyes.

Fifteen seconds.

"Beako," Subaru called, "His leaping is getting obnoxious. Do you have any magic that could trap us all in some kind of cage so he has less room to avoid us?"

Beatrice thought about it then nodded.

Subaru felt a shadow passing over him and looked up to see Roy trying to jump over him. The toad like monster landed right behind Beatrice and tapped her with his left hand before running up the stairs to where a helpless Emilia lay all alone.

"Beako!" Roy cheered, licking his hand as he raced up the stairs.

Then Roy fell down. His body trembled and he vomited all over the stairs.

Beatrice cast a spell and grabbed Roy around the ankle with a whip made of shadows. She swung Roy over her head and threw him back down the stairs. Roy crashed onto the ground near a large boulder in the field and was noisily sick again.

"You... tricked me!" Roy gasped, "That was a fake name!"

What is he talking about?

"Come on!" Subaru roared at Garfiel but Garfiel was already charging ahead.

Indomitable is Ready!

"Beako! The cage! Trap the three of us in the cage!" Subaru yelled as Roy got to his feet and turned away seeking to leap to freedom.

Beatrice cast her spell just as Roy leapt away and he crashed into a cage made of shadows that knocked him back to the ground.

Garfiel threw himself at Roy but the little Archbishop fought like a demon, cutting and biting at Garfiel.

"Garf! Throw him here!" Subaru screamed.

It was obvious that Garf didn't understand but he obeyed. He flung the twisted frog like creature straight at Subaru.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and punched Roy as hard as he could. The misshapen little monster went flying toward the boulder like a runaway train until he crashed into it full force.

Where he splattered like an insect against a windshield.

"Wow," Subaru whispered as all three of them panted for breath.

"Annoying little twerp, wasn't he?" Garfiel gasped.

"I suppose....," Beatrice said, weaving back and forth where she stood on the stairs.

Subaru quickly shook off his exhaustion. "Come on, we need to help the others!" Subaru shouted racing to the steps and hoisting Beatrice onto his shoulder.

Then Garfiel and Subaru raced off to find Roswaal and the twins.

What the fuck?! Is that Capella?! Subaru thought to himself as they raced toward the others locked in battle with a gigantic bear-like monster.

I mean, I guess it would have to be but I thought she was a dragon not a giant bear. She's trying to slash Roswaal but he's parrying her claws with a sword. Where did he get a sword? Oh, it's ice. He must have made it. Rem's slamming her mace into the thing's knees but Capella doesn't even seem to notice. Ram and Ryuzu are using air magic to blind it but to no effect. Shit, is she like Regulus? Can we hurt her at all?

Well, I guess there's only one way to find out.

Subaru and Garfiel came racing up to the fight. Subaru paused only long enough to put Beatrice down safely before charging straight at Capella. Garfiel roared a challenge as Capella moved to attack Ram and Ryuzu. As the bear turned to check the source of the noise, Subaru activated *Indomitable* and punched the bear in the belly, which was as high as he could reach.

Capella burst. She flew apart as if Subaru had punched a water balloon full of black gunk. By sheer luck, Subaru's punch blasted all the black sludge away from him and his friends. Subaru heard it bubbling and eating away at the grass like acid.

The black gunk pulled itself back together again and the Capella reformed as a blond girl. "Persistent bunch of cucks, aren't you? Where the hell is Scabies? He was supposed to keep you busy. Can't he at least *pretend* to be useful for once?"

"Your friend is lying in pieces for the sport of the crows," Subaru informed her.

Capella's eyes narrowed, "You killed Roy?"

"Yup and you're next!" Subaru promised.

"Yeah, keep dreaming you little piss-ant! Well, my Gospel tells me that I'm just about done here for right now. But before I go, I am supposed to give you an important message, Pride."

Subaru ignored the title, "Oh yeah? What's that? That you're attracted to men who think you're a disgusting little freak and you want me to sleep with you? You look like someone who gets off on degradation. I mean, it would explain the outfit."

Capella scowled and hissed at him but then she broke into a broad smile. "Oh no. It's about the Sacred Dragon's Blood," She purred.

Subaru blinked, "What about it?"

"It's gone," She giggled.

Subaru frowned, "What are you talking about?"

"It's all gone! The Kingdom doesn't have any more blood! I drank it all before I escaped the castle!" Capella cheered.

"No. That's not true. You're lying!" Subaru snapped.

"Of course it's true, you little retard!" Capella laughed, "If they still had the blood, don't you think they would have used it to try and save the King and his family? They didn't use it because they don't have it!"

Subaru looked up at Capella in absolute horror. *It's not true... She's lying... but... it makes sense... why wouldn't they try to use this miracle cure to save the King's family if they could? Or at least use it to save one of them?*

Oh my God. Emilia... what am I going to say to her...

"Then we'll ask for more!" Subaru shouted, "As soon as we reforge the pact with the dragon we'll ask him for some more blood," Subaru yelled back.

"Oh you silly, silly, little shit," Capella mocked, "You don't understand anything at all, do you? The truly powerful Sacred blood must be taken from a dragon's last heartbeat. The dragon won't lay down his life to you just because you ask him nicely! If you want any more blood drawn from the dragon's heart, you'll have to take it the old fashioned way."

The world trembled around them and the sky shimmered as if a translucent lid was being lifted off the area. Subaru felt an intense pain in his gut as Rem, Roswaal, and Garfiel all clutched the same place on their own bodies.

Ram and Beatrice both collapsed.

"OK, guess that's my cue! I need to go and guide that insipid, overstuffed virgin Regulus in here now. See you soon!" Capella cheered as she transformed back into the dragon and flew away.

Subaru broke out in a cold sweat.

"Pansy?" Garfiel muttered, "Who the hell is she talking about?"

"Regulus!" Subaru cried, "She's bringing Regulus in here! We have to get out, now!"

At that moment, Felt drove up to them in an enormous carriage that looked more like a train car. It was being drawn by four earth dragons. Felt struggled to control the earth dragons but she managed to bring them to a stop.

"My carriage. A most excellent choice, Miss Felt," Roswaal commented, bending over the passed out Ram. "Hm. Ram

was injured by the shattered barrier. I must tend to her," Roswaal murmured casually, picking Ram up and carrying her into the carriage.

"Not now!" Subaru yelled at Garfiel who was clenching his fists at Roswaal. "We need to get out! Garfiel, Ryuuzu go and make sure that the Sanctuary people and the villagers got the signal to run! Rem bring Beatrice inside the carriage! I'm going to run back to the Tomb!"

Garfiel snarled but nodded and he picked up a visibly uncomfortable Ryuzu before leaping away at a sprint. Rem gently picked up Beatrice.

Subaru took off at a run back to the black tomb. There was nothing apparently different about it from outside but as Subaru ran inside he didn't feel any pain: the mana barrier was gone.

Inside he found Emilia, lying there like a crumpled doll.

"Emilia!" He screamed, leaping to her side. He pressed his ear against her mouth and broke into a huge smile when he heard her breathing. "That's it, Emilia," Subaru encouraged. "Great work! Come on, we're all getting out of here!" He slung Emilia over his shoulder and ran back to the carriage, his lungs burning with exertion.

Subaru leapt into the carriage through the back door. The carriage was a long rectangular shape that was almost two separate rooms with a narrow opening between them in the middle. The carriage had four reasonably sized couches inside; one in each corner. A thin curtain across the narrow opening between the 'rooms' separated the front set of couches from the back set, possibly for privacy. Subaru found Beatrice on the couch in back and he gently put Emilia down on the couch across from her.

Subaru leapt to Beatrice and was relieved to find out that she was still breathing strongly.

Whatever that shockwave thing was, it must hit you harder depending on how much mana you have, Subaru thought.

Subaru ran into the front of the carriage and pulled the curtain shut behind him. Roswaal had placed the unconscious Ram on the couch and was casting some kind of spell on her.

"Is Ram OK?" Subaru asked, hating the fact that he had to talk to Roswaal.

"She shaaaall be fine, young Subaru. Her body is simply overworked. Having one's mana burned is a most uncomfortable experience. Luckily I am familiaaar with means to defend myself against it," Roswaal replied, continuing to treat her.

"Great," Subaru muttered.

Garfiel came pounding up to the front of the carriage and leapt inside. "Oy! Ryuuzu and the others are all gone! I climbed the lookout. Everyone's bugging out like rats out of Cornwall!"

"Wow, I think that I actually understood that one. They're all gone?" Subaru asked.

"Yeah. They took your advice. Once they hit the border they all split up and they're going every which way. If anyone wants to catch more than one or two of them they'll be working hard for it; like Gundrak at Valagene."

"Alright then, that's the best we can do!" Subaru shouted, pushing past Garfiel and out the front of the carriage.

"Rem, Felt, get us out of here!" He shouted at the two girls sitting up front.

Rem cracked the reins and the earth dragons took off at a run.

Subaru stepped back into into the carriage and rubbed his eyes.

"Garf, aren't you going to go with Ryuzu and the others?" Subaru asked.

"What? Are you kidding? I need to keep an eye on my woman!" Garf snorted.

"Your wom-?!" Subaru gaped, "You know, what? Whatever. I have much bigger problems to worry about right now."

The carriage thundered down the road.

"Now what the hell do we do?" Garfiel rumbled, deliberately looking away from Roswaal who was still treating Ram.

"Now we run!" Subaru emphasized. "I don't know where Regulus is but if Capella went to go find him, he can't be too far away."

"Who is this Regulus guy you keep talking about?" Garfiel asked, "Is he like Roy or is he more like Capella?"

"He's far worse than both," Subaru said seriously. "As far as I can tell he's completely invulnerable to any attack and his magic lets him shatter trees and boulders like glass."

Garfiel's eyes widened. "No way! Everybody has their weak point. Even Yorick the Strong had his twisted finger," Garfiel said uncertainly.

Well, that's good. The old Garf would have rejected my warning out of hand. Now he's at least considering the possibility that he might be outmatched.

"I'm sure that you're right," Suabru agreed, "But I don't know what his weak point is. And throwing ourselves at Regulus to try to figure out what his weak point might be seems a lot like jumping face first into a meat grinder. Until we work out what his weak point is, we have to run," Subaru emphasized.

Garfiel grimaced and then nodded.

Subaru walked out front to the driver's platform and Garfiel followed. Rem was driving and Felt sat beside to her.

"Are we almost clear of the Sanctuary?" Subaru asked the girls.

"Yeah!" Garfiel answered, "That's the forest edge right there!" He pointed a few miles in front of them. Garfiel frowned. "I'm going to go and take a quick peak up that tree," He said pointing at a massive fur that dwarfed all its neighbors. "Least ways we'll know when that Regulus guy gets close."

"Wait!" Subaru grabbed Garfiel as he tried to leap away. "You don't even know what you're looking for!"

Garfiel looked angry but then paused and nodded.

"Regulus is a thin man with white hair. Try to keep an eye out for Capella. A huge black dragon should be easy to spot and if she's guiding Regulus in here then wherever *she* is, Regulus won't be far behind. Don't take any chances, just get up there, take a peek and get back."

Garfiel opened his mouth to protest but Subaru didn't give him the chance, "If Capella sees you then she'll stop guiding Regulus to the Sanctuary and start guiding him toward *us*."

Garfiel hesitated then scowled. "Whatever you say, *Captain*," He snorted then leapt away at a speed that the earth dragons couldn't match.

"Subaru, are you *really* sure you want to bring this guy with us?" Felt asked, sounding as if being flippant right now was taking great effort. "Mutinies have broken out over less, you know. He's immature, arrogant, and flat out stupid."

"We can't all have your brains, Felt," Subaru admitted with a weary sigh, "Besides did you get a close look at Petelguese?"

"Closer than I'd like," Felt replied.

"Yeah, well a whole group of people who could kill Petelguese effortlessly are now heading this way and they explicitly want to kill all of us," Subaru said.

Felt's face turned white.

"I'm not inclined to turn down an offer of assistance from anybody right now," Subaru concluded.

"Miss Felt," Rem said, "Young Garf is arrogant and stubborn but he has a good heart. He's just very immature. I'm glad that he's with us. He's not very clever and I'm worried about what would happen to him if he went off alone."

Felt snorted but made no further objections.

"Subaru," Rem asked with an edge in her voice, "What did that Witch Cultist mean when he said that he wasn't supposed to kill you?"

"I don't know but he got over it pretty quick," Subaru replied.

Rem gave him a dark guarded look.

Subaru sighed, "I don't know, Rem. Really I don't. Look, I promise that once we get clear of here I'll tell you everything I know. I'll lay everything out on the table for you so that you can decide if you want to keep trusting me or not. But it's going to be a *long* conversation and there's no time right now so lets just all focus on staying alive at the moment so that we have a chance to go over it all later."

Rem looked at Subaru with misgivings but turned her attention back to the road.

Rem is suspicious but she's not hostile yet. She is definitely going to demand answers to some questions when the chance arises but I think that the bulk of her suspicions were removed by the fight with Roy and Capella.

Subaru saw Garfiel racing back toward the carriage as Roswaal stepped out onto the driver's platform.

"Lord Roswaal!" Rem exclaimed, "Ram-"

"Your sister will be entirely fine, Rem," Roswaal said calmly, "She merely needs to rest."

Garfiel leapt to the carriage and hung off the overhang above the driver's platform as there wasn't much room on the driver's platform for five people. "I saw Capella! She's a ways off to the south. There's a tornado coming from that way!"

"A tornado?!" Subaru exclaimed, looking up at the cloudless blue sky.

"Yes! Well, no. Shit, Captain, I don't know! Right underneath Capella there's something that's knocking down trees. They're not just falling down either they're bouncing up into the air and being thrown all over the place!" Garfiel exclaimed.

"Regulus," Subaru growled.

"Wait, are you telling me that this freak is doing all of that?! How the hell does anyone have that kind of power?" Garfiel demanded.

"Don't know, don't care!" Subaru yelled back, "Where is he going? Is he still making for the Sanctuary?"

"Yeah. They're about twenty miles out but they're moving fast! If they get to the Sanctuary and find out that we're not there..." Garfiel said.

Subaru ground his teeth. *They'll come right down this road, looking for stragglers.*

Fuck, what do we do now? Beatrice, Ram, and Emilia are unconscious and the rest of us are exhausted. We barely defeated Roy and he was practically a flunky! We have no chance against Regulus right now, none at all. Add Capella to the mix and the fight is going to be comical.

What do I do? Maybe I could distract them? I'd be running to my death but I can distract Regulus longer than anyone else could. I bet he's nursing a grudge from the last time we fought. Since they're allowed to kill me now, I'm guessing I can easily get him to chase after me...

You know what, why not? I've already fucked up everything. There's no dragon blood for Emilia and the Archbishops are tearing up the Sanctuary. Maybe if I die distracting Regulus so everyone can get away, I can at least redeem myself somewhat. One Sin Archbishop fighting another to save people, it's almost poetic. Beatrice will be devastated that I broke my promise but Emilia will be with her. Emilia will take care of her. Oh God, what will Emilia think if I die here...

Focus! Emilia needs to survive long enough to wake up before she can think anything! Whether they forgive me or hate me, at least they'll both still be alive. They can be a new family, a family without me. With no more dragon blood to pursue, their new quest can be to find Puck. Maybe that will help heal their broken hearts...

Subaru heard thunder echoing off in the distance and through the towering forest, he saw a huge tree, much taller than its neighbors, fall down.

Fuck! Coming fast is right! Regulus will catch up with us for sure if Capella spots us!

Damn it! There's nothing else to do.

Subaru sighed, "Alright! I'm going to go back!"

Everyone, even Roswaal, stared at him in astonishment.

"What?! Did you take too many hits to the head in that fight, boss?!" Felt demanded.

"I don't want to hear it, Felt! I'm the only one who can stall Regulus for even a little while! Get out of here! Get somewhere safe! Find Reinhard. If anyone can protect you from these monsters it's him," Subaru said.

Yeah if anyone can. Can even Reinhard stand up to Regulus? No, stop thinking like that, it doesn't help. First these guys need to live long enough to worry about it.

Garfiel snorted and dropped down from the overhang standing on the driver's platform. "Fuck, I ain't running then!" Garfiel said although his face was pale and his eyes wide. "If you're going back so am I! I ain't letting some cultist prick thinking he's so damn crazy he can run my ass up a tree! It'll be just like Darrahan and the Stormguard!" Garfield slammed his fists together.

Subaru got right up into Garfiel's face, "Don't be a fool, Garfiel! I'm going back there to die! I have no chance against Regulus! None whatsoever! But *I might* be able to buy you guys, and the people fleeing, the time you need to get away."

Felt stared at Subaru, white faced and her lips trembling, "Then I can double that time!" Felt cried defiantly. "I'm not letting you go back alone! You'd probably get lost finding your way back anyway," Felt snorted.

Subaru stared at Felt. *God damn it, Felt. When have you ever been this self-sacrificing? Or this stupid? Making a sacrifice for the greater good is one thing but this is just pointless. Regulus will obliterate you with one hit and he might never even realize that you'd been standing there in the first place.*

"You are a helpless girl, Miss Felt," Rem interjected not unkindly, handing Felt the reins and taking out her mace. "Subaru will require someone who can handle themselves in combat, someone that understands how to recognize superior opponents and keep them at bay," She added, casting a weary look at Garfiel.

Garfiel actually looked a bit hurt.

Rem is willing to fight with me? Actually apparently she's willing to die with me. I guess her suspicions aren't as profound as I thought. Unless, of course, she's just worried that I'm about to double-cross her...

"Felt and Garfiel will watch over the carriage. I will go with Subaru," Rem said firmly.

"This is foolish," Roswaal said calmly, "You will *all* remain here. I will distract the Archbishops."

Subaru glowered at Roswaal, "Roz, please do not misinterpret this as me being concerned for your wellbeing in *any* way but Regulus will swat you like a fly."

"Of course he woould," Roswaal agreed pleasantly, "I said that I would distract him, not fight him."

Roswaal turned to look at Rem, "Rem, when your sister awakens, please inform her of my orders: Until such time as we meet again, I wish you to follow Subaru and obey his instructions as though they were my own."

Rem gaped at Roswaal and Subaru had to fight not to do the same thing.

Then without a word, Roswaal flew up into the sky and zoomed off to the south.

Subaru could only stare at the vanishing sorcerer in confusion for a moment.

"Subaru, we're exiting the forest," Felt warned him. "Which way are we going?"

Subaru looked through the thinning trees where they met a wide open plain.

"North," Subaru instructed. "We need to get as far away from Regulus and Capella as we can. There's no cover out here on the plains. Our only defense is speed and distance right now."

Felt obediently turned the earth dragons and the carriage raced up the road to the north.

The sounds of thunder and falling trees began to fade in the distance as the carriage raced away from the forest.

"I hope Ram is alright," Rem whispered.

Garfiel gave her a sharp look.

"Ram is fine," Subaru assured her, "I may not trust Roswaal farther than I can kick him but I am confident that he cares about Ram. He wouldn't have left her here if he didn't think she'd come through just fine."

"Honestly, the person I'm most worried about right now is Beatrice," Felt admitted, "She seemed like a broken doll when Rem carried her inside."

Subaru rubbed his face, "Her breathing is strong. I think that she's just exhausted," Subaru said, hoping it was true.

Garfiel snorted, "If you guys are solid up here, I'm going to go check on Ram," He said, heading into the back.

Subaru sighed and rubbed his face, "I get the funny feeling that maybe I should go back there and keep an eye on him."

"I would appreciate that," Rem replied calmly, "Since Lord Roswaal has healed my sister, we must assume that she could wake up at any time. It would be a shame if she killed Little Garf upon awakening due to him being inappropriate again."

"And why would that be a shame, exactly?" Felt asked Rem.

"I'll just be back here," Subaru sighed to no one as he entered the carriage.

Subaru checked Ram's breathing which was clear and strong. Garfiel hovered behind him.

"Garf, I'm going to go check on our other patients. Why don't you just take a seat and give Ram some space while I'm back there. Rem has a *very* hard mace and I speak from personal experience when I say that you do *not* want to get hit with it," Subaru said.

Garfiel sighed, "Oy. She's Ram's sister, alright," Garfiel walked to the only free couch and splayed out on it, rubbing his forehead.

Subaru walked through the curtain into the back half of the carriage.

He checked them both. Emilia and Beatrice were both still unconscious but at least they were breathing easily.

Emilia and Beatrice have a ton of mana. That... mana drain whatever it was seems to hit people worse the more mana they have. Emilia and Beatrice must have felt like they were hit by a truck.

Roswaal treated Ram for the mana drain but I'm not sure if he healed Emilia or Beatrice. He didn't mention it.

Does Emilia need to be healed? Was she hurt by the mana drain or was she shielded from it by being inside the Tomb at the time and she's just exhausted from the trials? And what about Beatrice? Did she not get the treatment she needs to survive or did she not need treatment because she's a spirit?

Fuck me, why didn't I make sure that Roswaal healed both of them before he took off? He probably didn't do anything for them. I feel like Roswaal would have made sure that I was aware of it if he had healed them so I'd know that I owe him. Come to think of it, why didn't he suggest healing them?

As far as I can tell, Roswaal has lost all of his leverage over me at this point. If he had offered to heal Beatrice and Emilia that would at least have put me in his debt. I wouldn't have become his servant but I would have at least heard him out if he asked me for help with something. I'd do it against my better judgment but still...

Subaru stroked Emilia and Beatrice's heads for a moment but they didn't react.

They don't feel my presence. They're too deep asleep.

Subaru bit his lip and then pinched both girls, hard.

Emilia and Beatrice both flinched and muttered but they didn't wake up.

Wonderful! At least they can still feel pain so they're not in a coma. They must be deep asleep but this suggests that they might just wake up whenever they're ready.

That's the best news I'm going to get right now. There's nothing left for me to do at the moment but wait. Fuck me.

Subaru went back to the front half of the carriage and sat down next to Garfiel with a sigh.

For a moment neither one spoke.

"What do you think that Regulus freak is going to do to the Sanctuary? You think that he'll actually destroy it?" Garfiel asked.

"I hope so. If we're lucky he and Capella will take the time to demolish every single building," Subaru replied with a tired sigh.

Garfiel snarled at him, "You son of a-"

"If Regulus isn't destroying buildings, that means that he's chasing people!" Subaru cut him off, "It means that he's either coming after us or another transport full of innocent people. I know that you love the Sanctuary, Garf. I know that it's your home. But buildings can always be replaced. Lives can't. That should summarize your priorities right there."

Garfiel snorted but he looked slightly thoughtful.

They were both quiet for a moment.

"I'm guessing you've never actually been out of the Sanctuary before," Subaru said quietly.

Garfield snorted and folded his arms across his chest, "Never wanted to be!"

Oh, yeah. I buy that. You're not nervous at all, are you, 'Little Garf.' Out in the big scary world for the first time with horrible monsters hunting you down? Yeah, you're completely calm.

Did he come along with us to look after 'his woman' or because he wanted Rem and Ram to look after him? He really is just a kid after all. He's probably close to freaking out.

Subaru changed tack, "Well, I bet a big strong guy like you is really excited to be on this journey," Subaru said.

Be careful, Subaru. Don't let your voice get sarcastic and you absolutely positively can not start laughing.

Garfiel looked at him through narrowed eyes, "What do you mean?"

"We're off on an epic adventure across country that you've never explored! We're fighting against terrible monsters that want to kill us and we have beautiful girls who are depending on us to keep them safe," Subaru continued.

Ladies, please forgive me for spoon feeding him this bullshit but the poor kid is scared right now.

Oh, boy. With my luck, Ram will wake up right now and then smear us both all over the walls. Hell, even Felt might give that a try if she walked in during this conversation!

Garfiel snorted, "Hey! Ram's got nothing to worry about with my magnificent self along on this trip! It's going to be just like Jonas and the Harpies!"

"Yeah, we got this. We already killed one of the monsters right? You and me fought side by side against the Archbishops, didn't we?" Subaru said.

"Yeah," Garfiel admitted.

"That was a hell of a fight," Subaru mused. "People will be talking about that battle for a hundred years."

Garfiel thought about that for a moment then chuckled, "It was a pretty intense fight, wasn't it?"

"That's putting it mildly. Frankly, for a while there, I thought that our dirty little playmate was going to be too much for us," Subaru replied.

"And then you smashed him into that rock and he burst open like a rotten fruit!" Garfiel cheered.

Subaru's stomach turned over at the thought of that image but he forced it back.

"Hey, I couldn't have done it without you setting me up for that spike," Subaru replied.

"Yeah... Yeah! We nailed him! We caught him between the hammer and the anvil, just like Varric and the ice beast!" Garfiel slammed his fists together.

OK, I know that I'm not from this world but what the hell is he talking about? I've spent the past month reading all the history and folk tales I can get my hands on and I still can't make heads or tails out of any of his references. Am I really still that ill-informed about world history or is he just making all of this shit up?

Garfiel scratched his cheek, "Hey, I'm real sorry about what happened to your little sister. She seems like one hell of a fighter," Garfiel said.

Subaru was about to correct him and then didn't. Beatrice was his sister by any other name, "Thanks," He replied.

"Is she doing OK?"

Subaru sighed, "Yeah, I think so. She seems to be in the same boat as the others. Her breathing is steady so hopefully she'll just wake up after she's rested a bit."

Emilia...

"You know," Garfiel mused, "When I was on top of that tree looking for Regulus, I thought that I saw something kind of funny..."

"What was that?"

"I thought that I saw an extra Ryuzu."

"Two Ryuzus?" Subaru asked.

Garfield looked at Subaru and his eyes glinted, "Yeah. Two," He coughed.

"Hm. What was the other one doing?"

"Well, I might have been mistaken but I think that she was riding your earth dragon out of there," Garfiel said.

Subaru slapped his forehead, "Fuck me, I completely forgot about her! Oh well, whoever 'Ryuzu number two' was she has my gratitude for at least getting that kind animal out of there. I have more than enough deaths on my conscience already."

They were both silent for a moment.

"So what do you know about these cultist freaks?" Garfiel asked him.

"Not very much. I only saw one for the first time yesterday," Subaru admitted.

Well, ignoring every time that I look in the mirror...

"How many of them do you think there are?" He asked.

"Dunno but there's got to be at least a few. The only ones that I've met so far that you don't know are Lye and Regulus."

Garfiel looked thoughtful, "Lye, huh? Did you fight him? Is he like Roy or more like Capella?"

"I didn't fight him," Subaru admitted, "But from what I saw he seems more like Roy. He just stood back and watched while I tried to fight Regulus."

Garfiel's eyes widened, "You actually fought Regulus?"

Subaru laughed, "Kind of. Actually, Regulus was knocking me around like I was nothing. I couldn't even scratch him. He was blasting trees and boulders away without any apparent effort. The only reason that I survived was that Lye reminded Regulus that he wasn't supposed to kill me."

"Huh?!"

Subaru shrugged, "Hey, I don't get it either but for some reason Lye and Regulus were apparently under orders from *someone* not to kill me, or at least not to kill me back then. Roy mentioned that, whatever my immunity was, it's expired. In fact, the whole reason that Regulus and Lye showed up was specifically because *another* Archbishop named Petelguese was about to kill me and apparently that was against instructions."

"Whatever happened to that Petelguese guy?"

"He's dead. Regulus vaporized him in one blow," Subaru replied, "There was nothing left but drops of blood, scraps of flesh, and a pair of boots."

Garfiel looked a bit frightened. "So what happens if Regulus *does* catch up with us?"

Subaru barked a laugh, "You, me, and Rem are going to get to do that 'last stand' thing we talked about. It'll be a short stand but I'm sure that it will be very valiant."

Garfiel growled, "Well, how long are we just going to run away like Drogo and Karnack? These freaks destroyed my home and almost killed all of us!"

"Not forever but we're getting out dodge right now," Subaru muttered, rubbing his face.

God I am exhausted, Subaru continued, "We won the fight but our team is worn out and we need to recover while the Archbishops hopefully waste their time and energy blowing up buildings."

Garfiel scratched his cheek, "Maybe we could set a trap for them? What if we waited near the Sanctuary for them to start leaving and then ambushed Lye? We could pick them off one by one."

"Bad idea," Subaru said shortly.

Subaru noticed Garfiel glaring at him and smiled ruefully, "Sorry, Garf but it really is. We're all exhausted and we're in no shape to pick another fight right now. Besides, even if that weren't the case, the Archbishops are all swarming together right now. If we attacked Lye the rest might come running."

Garfiel frowned for a minute, "So what is our plan then?" He grumbled.

"Pretty much what we're doing. Get away and recover. When the Archbishops try to come looking for us, they'll need to split up in order to search. *Then* we might get a chance to ambush one of them like you thought. If we're lucky, once he's isolated and vulnerable, we can all take him down together."

Garfiel snorted, "If it's Lye I bet I can handle him on all by myself. You lot can just hang back and watch."

"Oh, really?" Subaru asked with profound skepticism. "Just like you handled his brother by yourself a few hours ago? Oh wait, my memory misleads me. He kicked your butt."

Garfiel scowled at him and opened his mouth to respond.

"If I go up against Regulus, I am going to *die*," Subaru cut him off. "It's just that simple. If I go up against Capella, I am going to die. And I doubt that I will have better luck with Lye if I try to take him on alone. These freaks aren't people, Garf, they're monsters. This isn't a case of 'let the better man win', it's a case where we all dog pile the monster and hope to hell that we can kill it before it eats every last one of us."

Garfiel frowned but he seemed to be thinking about it.

"There's no shame in asking for help, Garf. You helped me protect the people I love, so now I owe you one. That means I'm going to help you get even for the home you lost. In the meantime until you find your place out here, you have a home and it's with the twins and me and our friends," Subaru held out his hand to Garfiel.

Garfiel stared at Subaru's hand for a moment and then shook it.

"Well," Garfiel said with a slow smile. "I guess my glorious self can stand fighting with you one more time. The 'little bit' too once she's feeling better."

"Oh yeah, she's going to want to get even!" Subaru assured him, "We may be running away right now, Garf but make no mistake that battle was a victory. How often do you think one of the Sin Archbishops actually dies? *We killed* one of them and then we all got out safely. We owned the freaks. And they made a huge mistake."

"Yeah," Garfiel growled, "They should have made sure they had all arrived before they attacked. We got to take them on one by one and they weren't in position help each other or to cut us off before we got away."

"No," Subaru disagreed. "They made us *angry*."

Garfiel flashed him a savage grin, "Fuck yeah, they did! When you shoot the tiger you better not miss! Next time, we'll be ready for them!"

"Damn right," Subaru approved. He cocked his head as he heard Felt and Rem arguing up front. "Jeez, what's going on now?"

Subaru got up and walked out the front door with Garfiel following behind.

"-That is completely foolish," Rem proclaimed.

"Don't you talk to me like that, you-"

"Hey, what's going on?" Subaru asked, looking ahead. They were approaching a five way crossroad.

"We should return back to the manor, Miss Felt," Rem said in a curt voice. "Ram will wish to see Lord Roswaal as soon as she wakes up."

"Maybe she does but don't ask me why," Felt retorted. "Does she have a backstabber fetish? Besides we're being chased down by literal demons from hell. We need to go someplace we'll be safe and that means we head back towards the capitol and look for Reinhard."

"Lord Roswaal is entirely capable of keeping us safe," Rem asserted.

"Yeah, right up until we're between him and something he wants," Felt snorts.

"OK," Subaru said interrupting. "So that road goes to the manor and that road goes to the capitol," He said, pointing at the closest two roads. "Rem, where does that road lead?" He asked, pointing straight ahead.

"That goes to the capitol as well but it's the long way around. It avoids most of the Mathers territory and brings us close to Gusteko and then far out to the north east of the kingdom before heading south again," Rem replied.

"And I assume that road heads out toward Priestella?" Subaru asked, thinking back to the maps he'd seen while pointing at the road that led west.

"I believe so," Rem replied. "Lord Subaru, we should return to the manor and reunite with Lord Roswaal before those creatures catch up with us."

"Roswaal isn't there, Rem," Subaru replied before Felt could jump in. "He's just made the Sin Archbishops really really mad at him. If he went back to the manor then they would know right where to find him if they took it personally enough to hunt him down."

"Also," Subaru added in a growl, "Roswaal has just made *me* really, really mad at him and he's not going to risk being somewhere I can get my hands on him until he's sure that I've had enough time to calm down. Roswaal is in hiding right now. We won't find him, he'll find *us* when he's ready."

"So we go to the capitol," Felt asserted.

"Yes but we're going that way," Subaru replied, pointing straight ahead.

"Lord Subaru-" Rem began.

"Please, Rem, just 'Subaru,' He sighed.

Rem took a deep breath, "Subaru, why are we going the long way around?"

"Because the Archbishops are still out there and they're specifically looking for *us*. They're going to assume that we either went to the manor or the capitol and they'll be watching for us on those roads. Hopefully by taking the long way around, we can put them off the scent for a while. We're in no condition to take another fight, Rem. We need to stall for time and get them off our trail while everyone recovers from the Sanctuary fight," He paused, "Do we have enough food to take the long way?" He asked.

Rem sighed and shook the reins leading the carriage straight ahead. "We have ample provisions in the carriage and we will pass several trading posts on this road where we can acquire more."

"Better and better," Subaru said in a weary voice.

"Subaru," Felt murmured, "We are going to go find Red, aren't we?"

"Yes," Subaru agreed firmly, "But Reinhard can take care of himself, better than any of us can. He's not in any danger, *we* are. That means the priority is for all of us to stay alive and safe until we can hook up with him again."

Felt did not look happy about this but nodded, "Do you think the Kingdom will send Red up here to deal with the cult?"

"Probably," Subaru replied, "But it's a question of when. It could take a while before the Kingdom even figures out what's been happening out here."

Subaru's eyes widened, "Oh, shit! I should have told the villagers to make for a garrison and report that the Archbishops are on a rampage. Too late now." He shook his head in disgust at himself.

Subaru sighed, "Garf, why don't you go in back and take a nap. You're been running around today more than any of us."

Garfiel laughed, "Why? I can go on for days if I have to?"

"No doubt," Subaru said seriously, "But why would you want to? The goal is to be in tip top shape in case the freaks find us. If any of them catch up with us, almost half our crew is unconscious. We all need to be at 100% if we're going to have any chance. Besides," Subaru leaned in to whisper to Garfiel, "When will you get another chance to sleep near Ram?"

Garfiel's eyes widened and he turned a bit red. "Yeah," He yawned a little theatrically, "Maybe I could stand to catch forty winks," He said, heading back into the carriage.

"Subaru," Rem grumbled, "Please refrain from offering my sister up as an inducement."

"I know, Rem," He sighed, "I'm going back there myself now to check on everyone. I'll keep an eye on him."

Subaru checked on Ram but she seemed to be in the best shape of the three so as Garfiel quickly nodded off, Subaru went into the back.

Garfiel's snoring quickly filled the carriage like an approaching thunderstorm.

Nothing had changed for Beatrice or Emilia so Subaru just sat down on the floor, laying back against the couch where Emilia rested.

Subaru buried his face in his hands.

Oh my God, how did I fuck this up so badly?! When did I lose control here?

Well, you haven't actually lost control yet, another part of Subaru observed. Its voice was dry, clinical, and completely unwelcome. *It's a setback certainly but really all you-*

Shut the fuck up! God! I thought I was so smart and so clever. I was going to get Emilia whatever she needed and that there was nothing anyone could do about it!

Why was that? Because I was the hero of this world? No, it's because I'm a fucking witch! Everything I accomplished is because I was using the same magic that Regulus, Capella and the others use! I felt powerful because I was only facing people who didn't have this kind of black magic and that made me feel like some kind of big man!

Then I met a few people who do use the same kind of witchcraft and boy was that a rude awakening!

In the past week I've been outsmarted by a guy who wears clown makeup, my champion is off in the south somewhere playing farmer, my fiancée almost had a mental breakdown and my cat's run away. I lived through the last three battles by the skin of my teeth and some of that was only because my opponents were explicitly not trying to kill me! I manage to get two different communities destroyed on my watch and now I'm running for my life with a bunch of folks who have no chance of surviving if Regulus or Capella catch up to us.

How did I fuck this up so badly?

Subaru's mind suddenly drifted back to Reinhard's words at the royal selection announcement.

"I am proud to stand here today and pledge my enduring loyalty to Lord Subaru, the man I myself revere as King."

Subaru wanted to beat his head into the floor. "Sorry, Red," Subaru whispered, "I guess if you were here right now you'd be having some serious second thoughts about me."

"Why?"

Subaru spun around and saw Emilia looking at him bleary eyed from the couch.

"Emilia!" Subaru gasped, grabbing her hand. "Are you alright?"

She seemed confused, "Subaru, what happened?"

He gently kissed her palm. "You passed the trials, Mili! You freed the sanctuary and we got everyone out!" Subaru whispered.

Emilia's eyes widened in wonder and she began to smile. "I did?" Emilia pressed her face into the cushions in sheer exhaustion but her smile broadened. "Then I guess I finally saved you for a change."

"You're the hero today, Mili," Subaru promised her. "You saved all of us. You deserve all the credit."

"Where are we?"

"We're in Roswaal's... carriage thing. I don't know what you call it," Subaru admitted.

"Are we going back to the manor?"

Subaru hesitated, "We're heading someplace safe," He sidestepped.

Emilia rubbed her face into the cushions. "Subaru, I'm so tired," She whimpered.

"Then go back to sleep, Mili," He encouraged, rubbing her back. "Everything is fine right now. I'll be here when you wake up."

Emilia flashed him a smile and then drifted off to sleep.

Subaru lay back with a smile on his face. *She woke up. She's exhausted but she woke up! She's going to be OK. She just needs to rest a bit. Thank God.*

But now what?

Subaru buried his face in his hands.

Oh my God, how am I going to tell her that the dragon blood is gone? 'Hey Emilia, some bad news: we discovered that the kingdom doesn't have any more dragon blood so we've been completely wasting our time with the royal selection and nothing that we've worked on has advanced your goals in any way. We could have spent the last month shoveling snow out of the great Elixir Forest and accomplished more with our time. Also, since nobody has seen this divine dragon in decades, for all I know the entire species is extinct and we are completely out of options to heal your people.'

No! I'm not licked yet! There is still a way. I know there is a way to save Emilia's people because... the clown... told me that I'd become his ally after I heard that the blood was gone. That means I'm not sunk, there is another way to do it. If there wasn't then I'd never become Roswaal's ally because he'd have nothing to offer me.

There is still some way to heal Emilia's forest I just need to work with... the clown. So what, do I go looking for Roswaal?

No, I just explained to Rem that Roswaal is absolutely in hiding right now from both me and the Archbishops. He's not

going to risk contacting me until he's sure that I've regained my temper. So that means that I just need to keep the twins close; even though one or both of them are almost certainly spies. When Roswaal decides that I'm ready to talk, he'll come back and make his offer.

Subaru's eyes widened. *Or do I already know the answer? The Authority of Pride! That's what Roswaal wants from me. I have no idea how it works but Roswaal implied that the Authority could give me whatever I most wanted. It gave me Reason and Judgment because I wanted to be smart and it gave me Indomitable because I was afraid. Roswaal told me that it would grow stronger and that eventually I'd be able to control it. How does it work? Is there a limit to it? If my greatest wish was to heal Emilia's people, would the Authority simply grant me the power to do that?*

But I have no idea how the Authority works. Could maybe... Reason and Judgment tell me? And I know that nothing is ever free so... if I do make that wish, what would be the price?

Subaru sighed.

Let's hold that thought in reserve for now. Maybe Beatrice will have a few ideas on other ways to heal the forest...

Subaru looked at the tiny spirit who lay unconscious atop the couch across from him.

Beatrice, what have I done? How could I let you get hurt so badly? The mana drain shockwave seems to impact people worse the more mana they have. Emilia only woke up for a minute, Ram's still out cold, and poor Beatrice must have felt as if she got hit by a train. I guess in a way we're lucky that Puck wasn't around. If he had gotten hit by that shockwave he might have exploded.

Subaru's eyes widened. "Puck," He whispered.

We're outside of the Sanctuary and the barrier's been destroyed! So maybe...

Subaru carefully reached out and, being careful not to wake her, touched the gem around Emilia's neck.

"Puck," He prayed.

For a moment nothing happened and then a tiny flying cat appeared in thin air and stretched.

"Hey there, Subaru!" He said with a yawn.

"Puck!" Subaru gasped.

"Long time no see! Give me paw knuckles!" Puck said.

Subaru extended his fist and Puck slapped it.

"I am so very glad to see you, my friend!" Subaru realized he was crying.

"Yeah, I don't know what happened, Subaru. Something was keeping me trapped. I couldn't get out!"

"The important thing is that you're back with us," Subaru sighed, "We're all together again."

Puck is home. We're getting back on our feet. We'll continue to get back on our feet. We will figure all of this crap out together, as a family.

Puck was looking around. "Betty!" Puck flew off to hover over the unconscious spirit. "Her mana is completely drained! Subaru, what happened?!"

Subaru sighed. "Well, I'm not really sure," He said, following Puck over to Beatrice's couch. "I think that when we broke that barrier that kept you locked up it drained everyone's mana to a greater or lesser extend. Most of the magic users are still out cold."

Puck inspected her, "Yeah, everyone here was hit with a bad mana drain but Betty's the one in the worst shape. Don't worry, Subaru. She'll be fine, she just needs a recharge. And luckily, I have plenty of mana!"

Puck hovered over Beatrice and started to glow with a warm orange light, shining down on Beatrice like a tiny sun. "It'll probably be a while before she wakes up though. So catch me up, Subaru. What did I miss? How long was I out?"

Subaru thought about it. "I'm guessing close to two weeks. There's a lot to tell you, Puck and it's all bad."

"Come on, Subaru. It can't be all that bad. I know that you can handle whatever gets throw at you," Puck replied.

Subaru wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, "OK, where to begin? So after we all separated, Beatrice, Reinhard and I went fishing and we managed to kill the whale. Yay, us," Subaru cheered sarcastically.

"Then we came to find you guys in Arlem only to discover that the village was being occupied by some sort of lunatic named Petelguese, a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, who wanted to kill me for some reason. I don't get it either, so don't ask. Petelguese gets killed by two more lunatics, Regulus and Lye, because apparently Petelguese ignored *somebody's* orders not to come after me. Regulus almost kills me and Betty but he eventually remembers his orders and leaves us alone. Then we follow you guys to the Sanctuary and find out that you've been sealed away in the crystal and everybody else is trapped inside the barrier and poor Emilia is on the verge of a nervous breakdown because the trials to free the sanctuary are destroying her mind."

Puck's eyes narrowed. "Subaru-"

"I know, Puck, I know!" Subaru said, falling back on the floor and burying his face in his hands. "This whole mess is all my fault! Everything Emilia went through is my fault! I will cheerfully submit to whatever punishment you think is appropriate; trust me, I deserve it. Just let me finish first. If you're going to obliterate me I would like to have thoroughly earned it."

Subaru shook his head and continued, "We find out that Roswaal has been playing us all for fools this whole time and that he was the one who hired Elsa to steal the insignia from Emilia in the first place. He also tricked Reinhard into going to the other side of the country so he wouldn't be able to help us while we were trapped in the Sanctuary. Roswaal tried to bind me in a magical slave pact in exchange for allowing me to pass the trials and free the Sanctuary because the Sin Archbishops were coming to kill everyone inside of it but Emilia managed to complete the trials and break the barrier. Garfiel- that's the new guy over there, you haven't met him yet but he's OK-, Beatrice, and I fought a gluttony Archbishop named Roy to buy Emilia time to finish the trials and we managed to kill him. Meanwhile, Roswaal and the twins are fighting another Archbishop named Capella. Capella escapes but not before telling me that the kingdom's dragon blood is all gone and everything that we've done up until this time to try to help Emilia by reaching the throne has been a fantastic waste of time!" Subaru snapped at himself.

Puck just stared at Subaru.

"Capella warned us that Regulus was coming and Regulus is somebody that none of us could possibly hope to stand against, maybe not even with Reinhard backing us up. So we piled into wagons and everyone flees the sanctuary and we barely managed to get out of there with our lives before Regulus shows up. Now we're on the road and I have literally no idea where we're going or what we're going to do next!" Subaru paused, gasping for breath.

Subaru shook his head, trying to shake off his frustration, "I'm really grateful that you're back, Puck," He continued gently. "I missed you. Plus not only can you help heal Beatrice but you can be there when we tell Emilia that the dragon blood is gone and that we don't have a Plan B to heal the forest just yet. Emilia... is going to be shattered. I literally can't imagine a more terrible revelation for her. It's just going to break her heart. She's going to need both of her boys there to help her through this, buddy," Subaru extended his fist for a paw knuckle.

Puck just floated there with an unclear expression.

"Subaru," Puck said. "Who is Emilia?"

Well that's where we stop for now. I'm sure some people are disappointed that Echidna didn't turn up but she has her own goals and it didn't seem like the right time to introduce her. Roswaal is far more sinister and antagonistic in this time line (although honestly I didn't really buy the way that he was 'redeemed' after arc 4, anyway) mostly because he's jealous: Subaru did become a 'warlock' in this story and that's something that Roswaal was never able to do. If Roswaal could obtain the Authority of Pride, he'd not only have a path to revive his teacher but he could stand beside her as an equal. Roswaal also needed to deliberately undermine Emilia in this time line partially because she's all in all a stronger person here and her memory was never sealed (and really? What was that plot point in the real story about? Did it reveal character? I don't get what it was trying to accomplish. It seems like a weak way to give Emilia an excuse for failing the trial because the author refuses to give her any actual conflict). If Roswaal hadn't broken her self-esteem then it was entirely possible that Emilia would have managed to pass the trial. I realize that I changed a lot about how the trials work as well as the nature of Emilia's trauma but the original version never really made sense to me.

I hope that people liked Emilia's arc because I really worked hard on it. I tried to give her some decent conflict to overcome although I admit I probably centered her conflict too much on Subaru rather than Emilia. I wanted her to forgive herself for her past. I also wanted her to come to terms with the fact that she doesn't want to be queen. Finally I needed her to slowly start to realize that her view of heroes is unrealistic: they don't accept heavy burdens because they want to, they take them on because the people they care about need them to.

I do hope that you enjoyed this arc and if you're willing to write a review I'd love to read it.

I need to take a break from Re:Zero for a bit and write a few more of my own stories but if enough people want an Arc 3 let me know and I'll be back. I wouldn't mind seeing where these kids end up.

This ends Arc 2 and our friends are in very serious trouble. The Sin Archbishops are hunting them down. There is no dragon blood left to save Emilia's people. Subaru is at the mercy of witchcraft that he can't hope to control and that he is being tempted to completely embrace. He no longer has any way of acquiring the dragon blood for Emilia so using the Authority to find another solution might be the only way for him fulfill his promise to his true love.

And worst of all, Emilia's name has been eaten.

What happens now? The party has grown significantly in this arc but the newcomers have somewhat dubious loyalties. Worse still they're going to find out that Subaru brought someone out of the Witch's Tomb: a silver haired half-elf who looks just like a witch...

Subaru has an awful lot of explaining to do. Do you think that his friends will believe him about Emilia? Or will they accuse him of being bewitched?

What's more dangerous: The Sin Archbishops who want Emilia for some unknown reason or the outside world that has never heard of Emilia and now can only see her as the image of the witch? Or could it be the possibility that a faithful friend might decide that the only way to break the spell cast upon Subaru is by killing the half-elf witch?

***Chapter 11*: Chapter 11**

So here we have Arc 3. I'm very curious what people think. Originally what you see here was just going to be the first two and a half chapters in the arc but I decided to make it the entire arc to give me more time to focus on certain things.

I'm really curious what people think of it. This arc took me a long time to write and I wound up rewriting it over and over again so if you read it, please drop me a review.

So I wanted to answer some of the questions that I've been posed.

1. The Witch Cult BELIEVES that Petelguese is definitively dead. When Petelguese rebelled against the Gospel, due to it making pronouncements about Subaru that Petelguese refused to accept, Petelguese went rogue as far as the Witch Cult was concerned. His fingers all abandoned him, willingly or under duress, and those who refused to do so were slaughtered by Capella. That said, just before Petelguese died, all of his remaining fingers vanished and the Witch Cult has no idea where they went.

2. Otto was in the Sanctuary during Arc 2 but Subaru didn't notice him. Subaru was only in the Sanctuary for two days and he had bigger problems. Otto abandoned a large amount of valuable merchandise in Arlem in order to make space in his wagon so he could help the villagers flee for their lives from Petelguese. The people of Arlem think very highly of him now and that will assist him in future business deals with the Arlem villagers. Even better for Otto when he returns to Arlem he will find his merchandise intact and undamaged.

Otto also developed good relations with some of the people in the Sanctuary, especially for some reason Ryuzu. He came to view Alma and Delma as the grandmother he never had. He was also consistently baffled by their hot/cold shifts in personalities whenever Shima took over being Ryuzu for the day. Otto tried to mainly stay out of sight during his stay in the Sanctuary as Garfiel wasn't too happy about the way Otto appeared to be 'stealing' his Grandma. The Ryuzus bonded with Otto so well that when the Sanctuary and Arlem residents were planning their escape from the Sanctuary, and it appeared that they had some space to spare for extra passengers, the Ryuzus entrusted Otto with the truth of their existence and even brought him to see the original Ryuzu inside the crystal.

It was possible that the Sin Archbishops would destroy the entire valley including the Ryuzu facility and that the current crop of clones would be the last ones ever. So the Ryuzus asked Otto to help them save all of the clones and he agreed. The hidden facility did in fact survive the Archbishops' rampage but its destruction was a valid concern.

3. Roswaal's plan went sideways in the Sanctuary. Roswaal planned for Emilia to be completely isolated with no Subaru or Puck for a full two weeks and to be subtly manipulated by Roswaal until it was absolutely impossible for her to pass the trials. Roswaal also intended to make Emilia completely dependent on himself and to afterward keep Emilia close to him as an oblivious hostage by implying that she was holding Subaru back and that the bravest thing for her to do would be to let him go off alone. This would have given Roswaal an extra trump card if by some miracle Subaru managed to break their contract.

The reason this plan failed was due to Felt. Roswaal intended for Emilia to be all alone and surrounded by people who resented her. Felt showing up completely changed the equation. While Emilia and Felt aren't particularly close, Felt does care about her, and not just because she admires Subaru. Felt went through herculean efforts to take care of her and try to cheer her up.

Roswaal was absolutely shocked when they all arrived at the Sanctuary and it was revealed that Felt had come back with Emilia. His Gospel had said nothing about it. He flipped back over his Gospel and found a line that seemed to be hinting at it but at the time he had assumed this was referring to Capella preparing to attack the Sanctuary. The Gospel was having trouble with Felt. It was almost as if the Gospel was confused about who she was and who she was supposed to be; as if her destiny had been changed by some great power. Roswaal had never encountered this before and began to worry that Subaru might have, by accident or on purpose, given Felt a shard of his own Authority and that was what was distorting her destiny to the Gospel. Over the next few days however, the Gospel zeroed in on Felt and Roswaal accepted that the Gospel was working correctly and it must have been a bad error on Roswaal's own part.

Unfortunately this put Roswaal's plan in serious jeopardy as he wasn't having the effect on Emilia that he should have. Emilia was not completely isolated and Roswaal's manipulations of Emilia had to become far more subtle than he planned because of the risk that the very intelligent Felt would pick up on them and warn Emilia of Roswaal's duplicity. Killing Felt was an option but Roswaal decided that it was far too risky. Garfiel already wanted Roswaal dead purely out of jealousy. Roswaal was not an Apostle of Greed and could not command the Ryuzus. If they discovered that Roswaal was trying to destroy the Sanctuary, the Ryuzus would turn against him. Emilia would definitely turn on Roswaal if she discovered that he had killed Felt. Roswaal could easily handle any of these threats individually but if all three attacked him, Roswaal would likely have died, especially since Rem also respected Felt and would likely have been unwilling to defend Roswaal against Garfiel and Emilia or would only do so half-heartedly.

4. Roy ate Emilia's name. He touched her when he tried to grab her in Chapter 10 and since he was hungry he decided not to let it go to waste and ate her name. Unfortunately killing him does not restore her name because he had already digested it.

Trigger Warning: This arc is much darker than the last two. There is significantly more violence and some disturbing situations.

Subaru stared at Puck, "Puck. Buddy, that really isn't funny."

"Um. I'm not joking, Subaru. I've never heard of any 'Emilia,'" The flying cat said ruefully.

Subaru stretched his hands out and Puck drifted down into them while still streaming mana into Beatrice's unconscious body, "Buddy, I think that barrier thing might have damaged your memory. What *do* you remember?"

"Well... I remember us spending time at the capitol for a week or so. Then we split up. You were trying to become King or something like that although I admit I wasn't paying too much attention," Puck replied.

Subaru took deep breaths, trying not to panic. *God. I don't know if there could even conceivably be a worse time for Puck to develop amnesia.*

Subaru spoke slowly, "Puck, what is the last thing that you remember?"

Puck thought about it, "Well, I remember you reading to Betty before we went to bed. I remember talking to you about going back to Arlem. Then I went back into the crystal and the next thing I knew, I couldn't get out."

What the fuck? He remembers... he remembers everything except for Emilia! How does that make the slightest amount of sense?

Maybe I can jog his memory?

Subaru shook his head, "Puck, how did you get to Arlem?"

"In the crystal."

"Sure but how? I wasn't in Arlem or in the Sanctuary until yesterday so who brought you there?"

Puck blinked and pondered that question, "Um. Gee, Subaru, I'm not sure. Did you give my crystal to someone else? That's really not OK, you know," He criticized.

"Did *I* give someone your crystal?! How could I have done that? We don't have a contract," Subaru pointed out.

"Of course we do!" Puck said.

"What?"

"Come on, Subaru," Puck said sounding both offended and hurt, "We made a contract before you ever met Betty! Remember? We told you how you were 'that person' and we'd been waiting for you for four hundred years?"

Subaru stared at him.

Something is going on here. Losing his memory is one thing but memory loss isn't so specific as to just forget one person. And even if it was, his mind wouldn't be filling in the blanks this way.

"Puck, that's not possible," Subaru said gently. "Remember when I made my contract with Beatrice? She made me promise that I couldn't form pacts with any other spirits."

"Well sure, I remember," Puck agreed, "But you made the contract with me before you even met Betty so that didn't count. Betty can be just as greedy as I am, Subaru, but she'd never try to take you away from me."

Subaru felt the trailer coasting to a stop by the side of the road.

The earth dragons must need a rest. I should go ask Rem and Felt if they've ever heard of a case of amnesia like this. In a perfect world I'd be able to fix this before Emilia woke up but at a bare minimum I should at least have some idea of what I'm going to tell her about this. I have enough bad news to spring on her as it is without needing to tell her that her father has forgotten all about her.

"Puck, stay here for a minute and look after Beako, OK?" Subaru asked, "I'll be right back."

The little cat nodded and floated up off Subaru's hands.

Subaru walked past the sleeping Ram and Garfiel and exited the trailer.

Rem and Felt were sitting on the driver's platform chatting as the earth dragons rested in harness underneath a shady tree.

"Ladies, I think we have a problem," Subaru began.

"The Archbishops?" Rem asked in a terse voice.

"No, not quite *that* bad, I guess," Subaru mused, "Thanks for the perspective, Rem. I needed that."

Felt sighed, "After all this, how could we *possibly* have any more problems?"

"Trouble is the gift that keeps right on giving, Felt," Subaru replied, "The good news is that Puck is back and he's out of his crystal."

"Hey! That's great!" Felt said her face brightening.

"Yeah, the bad news is that he's completely forgotten who Emilia is," Subaru sighed.

Felt and Rem stared at him.

"I know," Subaru shook his head, "After everything she's already been through, Emilia is going to be devastated."

"Subaru," Felt asked awkwardly, "Who's Emilia?"

Subaru glared at her, "Felt, you know that I've had a very long couple of days. I'm not in the mood for that kind of humor."

"Um, I wouldn't mind being let in on the joke either, boss," Felt replied. "Who is she?"

Subaru stared at Felt in mounting horror, "Rem?" He almost pleaded.

The blue haired maid shook her head, "I'm sorry, Subaru. I've never heard of anyone named Emilia."

Subaru clapped his hand against his mouth barely holding back a scream.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and his fear floated away.

Alright, don't panic! You might want to scream but that is not going to help anything right now. This is very strange. Strange is useful. Common issues have a million different explanations but the bizarre barely have any. It's time to start asking questions.

Subaru restarted time.

"Ladies," Subaru said in a surprisingly calm voice, "Could you both join me in back? I think we need to have a very serious conversation."

Rem nodded, "Let us feed the dragons and we'll join you shortly."

"Jeez Captain, why'd you wake me up," Garfiel grumbled rubbing his eyes.

Ram was still asleep but Subaru led the other three to the back of the trailer where Puck waited with Beatrice and Emilia.

Subaru pulled the curtain aside and heard a sharp gasp.

He looked behind him and saw Garfiel staring at Emilia in sheer terror.

"Captain," He whispered, "What the hell is that?!"

Excuse me, 'what' is that? She's a person not a thing! Subaru thought with great offense. He shook off his irritation and fought for calm.

"This is Emilia. She's a long time friend of ours, a candidate for the throne, Puck's partner, and my fiancée," Subaru explained, "Something has rendered you all unable to remember her and we need to figure out what did this."

Everyone stared at him open mouthed.

Something is wrong here. I get that they don't remember Emilia and they probably think that I'm acting crazy right now but they don't just seem weirded out by what I'm saying. They look afraid.

"Subaru," Rem murmured in a tight voice, "Where did she come from?"

"She was born in the Eltor forest-" Subaru explained.

"That's not what I mean, Subaru," Rem shook her head, "How did she get here?"

"I brought her here after the fight with Capella," Subaru explained. "I went back to the Tomb to get her and found her passed out from the stress of the trials."

Felt stared at him in horror, "Wait! You took *that* out of the Witch's Tomb? A silver haired half-elf?!"

"OK, enough with the '*that*' already!" Subaru said losing patience, "I know that you guys don't recognize her but she's still our friend... err, she's still my friend...fiancée. Look she is still a person at the very least and she doesn't deserve to be treated like a thing!"

Garfiel, Felt, and Rem all looked at each other uncertainly.

Subaru sighed, "Look, I don't understand what's going on yet either but something has apparently damaged all your memories so the first thing we need to do is go over the past month and figure out what memories we have in common."

The group sat on the floor inside the trailer. Subaru noticed that he was the only one willing to sit near Emilia.

"Felt, do you remember how we met?" Subaru asked.

"Of course I do," Felt replied.

"So you remember stealing Emilia's insignia and how we tracked you down at Rom's place?" Subaru continued.

Felt stared at him.

"Felt?" He asked.

"Subaru," She said slowly, "Not that I would ever admit to stealing anything at all, but when we met you *gave* me your insignia to hold after I joined your faction. After all, if I'd touched someone else's insignia, wouldn't I have had to join their faction instead of yours?"

"You're not under oath here, Felt. You can skip the lawyer-speak," Subaru grumbled. He rubbed his face, "Puck, do you remember how we met?"

"Sure, Subaru," Puck shrugged in midair. "We met in that alley in the capitol after you tricked those boneheaded muggers into thinking that you cursed them."

"Exactly! Remember how you and Emilia came into the alley chasing after Felt and the insignia?" Subaru urged.

Puck was silent for a moment, "I'm sorry, Subaru, but I've never seen that girl before. I just went into the alley randomly and met you there. I figured out that you were 'that person' and we formed a contract."

What's happening? They remember everything except for Emilia!

Subaru buried his face in his hands, "Oh my God! This is like some horrifying nightmare I can't wake up from!"

"Hey! Calm down, boss," Felt murmured rubbing his shoulder. "Look, I don't know what's going on here yet but we're all with you and we're going to help. Let's just keep talking and we'll figure this out."

Subaru took a deep breath and nodded, "Right. Thanks, Felt, I needed that. OK, Roswaal was Emilia's sponsor. If there's no Emilia then how did I meet Roswaal?"

"The ass-clown came to the Astrea manor the night that you'd been wounded," Felt grumbled, "Reinhard had called him there to consult about the insignia reacting to you."

"But why did Reinhard and I go to his manor then? I went there because I wanted to see Emilia. I *stayed* there because I wanted to be near Emilia," Subaru replied.

"Lord Roswaal asked you to come and see him when you had recovered," Rem interjected quietly. "He said that he was interested in forming an alliance and supporting your claim to the throne."

"OK, so we went to his manor but why would we have stayed there? I can't imagine that I enjoyed the clown's company all that much," Subaru pointed out.

"To keep Red away from his asshole father," Felt replied.

Subaru shook his head.

This is so weird! Memory damage is one thing but whatever has afflicted everyone didn't just erase Emilia from their memories, it went back over her history and rewrote it so that everything she did has a plausible alternate explanation. What could possibly have the power to do this? One of the Archbishops? Or is this not a memory thing at all? Could Emilia and I have jumped time-lines to some parallel world where Emilia never existed? But when? And, more importantly, how did that happen?

Could my Authority have shifted us to a parallel world? Maybe but why? That isn't something I ever wanted to happen and it doesn't benefit me in any way that I'm aware of. Roswaal implied that my Authority responded to my unconscious desires. Could my Authority be suppressing and rewriting everyone's memories? Maybe but again why would it?

I need to figure this out.

"So, Beatrice and I just got to the Sanctuary two days ago, right?" Subaru asked slowly.

Everyone nodded.

"OK, so how did Puck get there? He was there for a few weeks right?"

"I brought him," Felt explained.

"You?" Subaru asked.

"Yeah, you *really* didn't want me to going to the meeting in Arlem alone," Felt replied making a face. "You made a huge deal over it. I kept telling you that I could take care of myself but you wouldn't listen and you insisted that I bring someone with me. Puck wasn't thrilled about it but you eventually convinced him to come with me and you gave me his crystal."

"Oh, right," Puck mused, "I remember that now."

Subaru looked at Puck sharply.

This isn't good. Puck didn't remember that earlier. Was that because his memory was fuzzy from being in the crystal for

so long or is some force editing people's memories in real time so that they don't look too closely at any of the inconsistencies?

"OK, so *I* remember Emilia going to the Sanctuary with you, Felt," Subaru said slowly. "You told me that you spent two weeks trying to help her pass the trials. She failed every day and then you would take her home and put her in bed. So, if there was no Emilia, what were you doing in the Sanctuary during those two weeks?"

"I was helping my boy Garf to try to pass the trials," Felt replied pointing at the young man, "But I definitely did not put him to bed!"

Garfiel gave Felt an amused snort.

"Garf can take the trials?" Subaru asked in surprise, "Wait! *Your boy?!*"

What the fuck! Felt hates Garfiel! She didn't even want him escaping the Sanctuary with us! Now they're buddies? What the hell is going on here?

OK, wait. Let's think about this. Felt probably hated Garfiel because of the way he treated Emilia. God knows that's why I hated him. If there really is no Emilia in this time-line then I guess it makes sense that Felt and Garfiel would become friendlier. They're both rough and tumble scrappers who are way smarter than they act.

"What?" Garfiel grumbled looking offended, "The shrimp and I were trying to take care of business while you were out wandering lost in the countryside like Dillon and Dutch!"

Subaru frowned thoughtfully while his friends looked at him in concern. "So... I remember Emilia passing the trials and freeing the Sanctuary but you guys remember Garf doing it?"

"Nah, it was fucking Otto," Garfiel grumbled folding his arms across his massive chest with a sneer of contempt.

"And who pray tell is Otto?" Subaru sighed.

Everyone stared at him.

"What?!" Subaru asked, "I'm not playing some kind of 'reverse practical joke' on you. I have no idea who Otto is. I've never met an Otto."

"Lucky," Garfiel snorted.

Rem and Felt glanced at each other.

"Otto was a traveling merchant," Felt explained, "He took Rem and me and some of the Arlem villagers in his wagon to escape from Petelguese. He came with us to the Sanctuary."

OK, so was this 'Otto' guy there in the Sanctuary all along and I just never met him or is he something that was introduced by this 'whatever you call it' that's affecting everyone? Either way I need to talk to him.

"And he had the qualifications to take the trials?" Subaru asked.

Weird. Roswaal said that Emilia was the only one who was qualified to do it. I guess he was lying? Hm, maybe not. I feel like Roswaal wouldn't have trapped Emilia in the Sanctuary if he thought there was any chance that someone else could have done the job for her. Maybe he didn't know? Or maybe this is another change to people memories?

"Not at first," Felt replied. "Originally, we all tried to take the trials but none of us were qualified. When that happened, Ryuzu revealed that Garf was qualified to take the trials. The fleabag was *not* happy with her about that."

"Stupid Grams," Garfiel grumbled.

"Garf had tried to take the trials once before," Felt explained with a faint smirk, "But the big dope wasn't able to pass them and he found that pretty embarrassing. Worse, he thought the trials were painful and terrifying and he *really* didn't want to have to take them again."

"Shut up, shrimp," Garfiel spat glancing away with a flushed face.

"Garf was *really* mad at Ryuzu for telling everyone that he could take the trials but Ryuzu told him to suck it up. The Arlem villagers had to get out of the Sanctuary before everyone starved to death or fighting broke out. Garf was our only choice so he had to take the trials," Felt concluded.

Subaru wasn't entirely able to suppress the glare he cast at Garfield.

So that's it! Garfiel was treating Emilia like shit because he was jealous! Emilia kept taking the trials which is something that Garf couldn't bring himself to do! He knew that he was scared and he resented it so he took it out on Emilia! Garf, I don't care that you're only fourteen, you are an asshole!

Subaru shook off his irritation. He had bigger problems right now, "OK, so where does this Otto guy fit in?"

"Otto was just kind of hanging out with the residents at first," Felt explained, "He apparently became pretty close to Ryuzu though."

Garfiel growled and ground his fist into his palm.

"Garf uh... didn't really take that too well," Felt said giving Garfiel an amused look, "Anyway, the day you arrived, Ryuzu did... *something* that made Otto qualified to take the trials."

"She can do that?" He asked in surprise. *Why didn't she offer to let me take them then?*

"I guess so," Felt shrugged. "But don't ask me how. She was pretty shocked too. She didn't give us many details about what she'd been trying to do but whatever she did to Otto, it wasn't *supposed* to make him qualified to take the trials. That was just an unexpected side effect, I guess. Anyway, Otto tried to take the trials and he had a mental breakdown."

"Seems like the standard reaction," Subaru sighed.

"Anyway, you and Otto really hit it off and you talked him through it. The next day he managed to pass the trials before the Archbishops came and we got everybody out," Felt finished.

Subaru drummed his fingers against the floor.

OK, so what the hell is going on here? Why would anything want to delete just Emilia from everyone's memories? And why wasn't I affected? That's probably the real key to figuring this out. Either I was deliberately excluded from whatever this is or my Authority protected me.

If I was deliberately excluded, that suggests someone is trying to extort me: "Do what we say and we'll give Emilia her life back." Roswaal maybe? Could this be another way of taking Emilia hostage?

Well, maybe but I don't think that Roswaal has this kind of power. If he could make everyone but me forget something, I can think of much more effective ways for him to use that ability. Besides, if someone wants to blackmail you, they usually make sure that you know who's doing it and what they want you to do to make it stop. Otherwise, they don't gain any leverage. Despite being the most powerful mage in the world, Roswaal seemed to be implying that the greatest magic belongs to the Authorities. So does that mean an Archbishop did it? Or a witch? OK, how and why?

Maybe it was Roy? Or Capella? But again, how and why?

What's the last time I remember anyone interacting with Emilia?

...The fight with Roy. She came out with Felt and I called her by name and no one reacted so whatever happened to her must have happened after that. Or could this be some final punishment of the trials? If you complete the Witch's trials you're cursed to be forgotten by everyone you know because Witches are assholes?

Maybe. Ryuzu might know. No, if she knew that the price for completing the trials would be everyone forgetting about you, I doubt she'd let Garf try to take them... or was she really desperate enough to sacrifice him?

I didn't get the impression that she's that cold blooded. But she might have heard a legend about the trials having that kind of effect and then discounted it. I need to find Ryuzu and pump her for information. I need to track down this Otto guy too.

"Felt, do you remember my confrontation with Roswaal?" Subaru asked.

"Not my fondest memory but yes," Felt admitted.

"What was his plan?"

Felt screwed her face up thoughtfully, "I'm not really sure, boss. He was pretty vague about what he wanted you to do, I mean aside from being his slave and all. He lured everyone into the Sanctuary to trap them and then used the Archbishops to try and force you to sign his slave contract. Otherwise, everyone would have died. Then you spiked his wheel by getting Otto to pass the trials."

Huh. Isn't that odd? There's no Emilia in this time-line to drive the point home. Would Roswaal's plan have really worked? If there had been no Emilia in the line of fire, would I still have signed myself away to save Beatrice, Puck, and Felt? Dying beside them is one thing but... selling myself into eternal slavery? Would I have really gone that far to save them? Roswaal must have thought so but I'm not so sure. I guess I'm really just not all that great a person.

Fuck me.

"Does anyone know why the Archbishops came to the Sanctuary?" Subaru asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

"Maybe they made a deal with the clown?" Felt guessed, "He said that they were coming to kill everyone but he didn't say why."

"Hm," Subaru mused, "I remember him saying that they were coming to the Sanctuary to try to capture Emilia."

"Wait a fucking minute! Those freaks came to the Sanctuary because of her?!" Garfiel demanded.

Oh shit.

"The girl that you took out of the Witch's tomb?" Rem asked her face darkening, "The Witch Cult came to get her?"

This is going nowhere good!

"Emilia!" Subaru shouted cutting everyone off, "Not the girl from the Witch's Tomb! She's our friend!"

"And are the Archbishops chasing after us right now to get the witch-girl back?" Rem demanded.

"She is not a witch, Rem!" Subaru shouted back. "And the Archbishops have plenty of reason to be chasing us regardless. I've already killed two of them and we have all made Regulus and Capella really mad!"

Everyone was quiet.

Subaru rubbed his forehead, "The Archbishops must have had *something* to do with what's going on with everyone," He said, "I'm guessing that nothing other than an Authority would have the power to shift everyone's memories around this way."

Felt, Rem, and Garf all looked at each other as Puck drifted down onto Subaru's shoulder to be petted.

Felt sighed, "Hey Subaru, have you ever heard of Occam's razor?" Felt asked quietly.

"I don't think so, what is it?" Subaru replied.

"It's something that Gramps taught me when I was a kid," Felt replied.

"Hey, shrimp, was that last week or the week before that?" Garfiel asked.

"Screw you, fleabag," Felt muttered. "Anyway, the idea is that 'the simplest solution is usually the correct one.'"

"In this world, I assume the simplest answer is always magic," Subaru muttered stroking Puck and trying to gather his thoughts.

"Probably," Felt admitted. She sounded awkward, "I mean, sure, it's *possible* that some great power has affected all of us and shifted our memories around and convinced a Great Spirit that he made a contract with someone that he didn't."

Subaru nodded petting Puck.

"But," Felt hesitated, "Isn't it also possible that maybe *you're* the one whose memories have been modified?"

Subaru shook his head, "I think the reason that I wasn't affected is because I have an Authority. That must have protected me from the effects."

"Maybe," Felt admitted, "But we don't know that much about the Authorities or how they work. Isn't it just *possible* that in addition to giving you great power it also makes you more vulnerable to certain things? Maybe more susceptible to witchcraft?"

Subaru scratched his head, "I mean, maybe, but why? What's the point in convincing me that someone existed when they didn't?"

"Well, I'd ask you the same question, boss," Felt said gently, "Why would anyone want to delete a girl from history? What's the angle? How does this benefit anybody?"

Subaru shrugged, "I'm struggling to answer that question too."

"Yeah, but," Felt continued, "On the other hand, if we assume that someone wanted you to believe that the girl was your friend and lover when she wasn't, I can think of lots of motivations for that one."

"Like what?" Subaru snorted.

"Well, protection for one," Felt said looking away from Subaru, "Maybe they needed the girl to have a protector while she recovered her strength because she would be vulnerable when she came out of the tomb."

Subaru looked up at Felt and frowned.

"You know, boss, Gramps told me lots of old stories about witches using magic to make men fall in love with them. They would make the men believe that they had always been the witch's lover. It's a neat strategy; great way of turning enemies into powerful allies and securing guards willing to die for you," Felt continued, sounding as if she was doing nothing more than thinking out loud.

Oh God, no...

She can't be thinking...

"Subaru, you said you brought that girl out of the Witch's Tomb, right?" Felt coaxed, "A silver haired half-elf? According to the legends, Satella the Witch of Envy was a silver haired half-elf."

Puck yawned, "I thought Satella was sealed away in the Auriga Sand Dunes."

"Hey, I don't know," Felt admitted, "I'm just saying that Subaru has brought a girl who looks *exactly* like the Witch of Envy out of a Witch's Tomb."

Subaru stared at Felt in shock.

"Subaru," Felt continued gently, "What if the witch is the one who's twisting *your* memories? Corrupting your thoughts?"

"No!" Subaru said firmly. "That is *not* what's happening! Emilia is *not* a witch and there is nothing wrong with my memories."

Felt clasped her hands together, "But come on, boss, how would you know?" She mused studying her hands, "I mean, if some magic had twisted my memories, how would I know that it had happened? Everything would seem completely normal to me. I'd think that all the folks who told me that my memories had been modified were crazy or trying to deceive me. So how do *you* know that your memories are intact?"

Subaru was breathing rapidly.

What do I say here?! I mean she's right. Well, she's right but she's wrong! I know Emilia! I know these memories are real! There isn't a doubt in my mind but how do I convince her of that? She trusts her own memories as much as I do! The only problem is that her memories are wrong!

"Captain, this witch must have been imprisoned in the Sanctuary for centuries!" Garfiel said.

"What do you mean?" Felt asked.

"The fucking Sin Archbishops came to the Sanctuary to find her!" Garfiel exclaimed baring his teeth. "Grams always claimed that the barrier around the Sanctuary was there to protect us from outsiders. But I always thought that was stupid. The barrier doesn't actually keep *anything* out. But it's awesome at keeping things in! We lower the barrier and bang! A witch appears in the tomb and we carry her out! What if the Sanctuary wasn't supposed to keep people safe but to keep the Witch trapped inside! The barrier made the Spirits weak while they were in there, maybe it also renders witches comatose as long as the barrier is up!"

Oh fuck. Garf, why did you choose this exact moment to start thinking for what must be the first time in your life?!

"I don't know, Garf," Felt said dubiously, "It's called a Sanctuary not a prison. That's not usually the kind of place where you lock someone up."

"Besides the barrier doesn't affect Authority possessors," Subaru pointed out, "It didn't effect me, Roy or Capella."

"Yeah, but Satella is a half blood!" Garfiel snarled, "Maybe that was enough to trap her inside the barrier! Maybe as long as the barrier was up she stayed in hibernation! Hell, there wasn't much else to do in the Sanctuary. Maybe Satella has been trapped in there for centuries!"

Oh my God. Satella... Do they really think...

"Subaru," Rem said calmly before Subaru could respond, "We can't fight the Sin Archbishops again. We're simply too exhausted to handle any more combat. Sister and Lady Beatrice are still unconscious. If the Sin Archbishops are chasing us to find the witch-girl then we should leave her here."

"No way!" Subaru shouted.

"Fuck that shit, Rem!" Garfiel retorted, "I'm not letting Satella roam around as she pleases. She almost destroyed the world last time! We should kill her while she's still weak!"

"Absolutely not!" Subaru said rising to his feet.

Garfiel stood up as well, snarling and with his fists clenched.

Subaru let Puck float away so that his hands would be free.

The two men stared each other down.

"You've seen me fight, Garfiel," Subaru warned, "You know what I'm capable of. Don't force me to prove that to you."

"Whose fucking side are you on, Captain?" Garfiel demanded with a snap of his jaws.

"You know, Garfiel, you really should think this through," Puck mused, floating next to Subaru, "Frankly, I have no idea what's going on here. I don't know that girl and I have only the vaguest idea of who you are but anyone who tries to hurt my Subaru is going to be very very sorry."

Subaru gaped up at the flying cat.

What the fuck is going on here? 'My Subaru?' Is this some twisted dream?!

"Hey! Everybody calm the fuck down!" Felt ordered.

Everyone stared at the small girl, "Look. We're not going to do *anything* right now," Felt said firmly, "We need to think carefully about our next move. We also need to wait until Ram and Beatrice wake up before we decide anything. The earth dragons have had their rest, let's just keep moving. No matter why they're after us, the Archbishops definitely want us dead. Even if they got whatever they wanted, the Archbishops would still kill us, so let's stay the hell away from them."

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

"A sensible plan, Miss Felt," Rem said calmly. She turned and walked out to the driver's platform without looking back.

Garfiel gave a low growl at Subaru but then his face changed. Garfiel actually looked hurt. His expression shifted him from looking like a ferocious fighter to a sad and lonely kid, "What's wrong with you, Captain?" He whispered walking away.

As Garfiel passed Ram's couch he picked up the unconscious girl and gave Subaru a look of reproach.

Subaru had no idea how to respond.

Garfiel turned away and carried Ram out to the driver's platform with Rem.

Felt sighed and rubbed her forehead, "Look, boss, I'm with you on this. I *am* going to help you figure out what the hell's going on here."

"I know what's going on here, Felt," Subaru said earnestly, "Something has removed Emilia from all of your memories."

"OK," Felt said awkwardly, "Sure. That's... a theory."

Felt shook her head and sighed, "Look, Subaru, we got bigger problems to deal with right now. Let's just all focus on getting the hell out of here and away from the Archbishops. We can figure out what to do with the... girl later."

"You don't believe me," Subaru said. It was not a question.

Felt looked pained, "Boss, look, I know how smart you are. You've always been able to see things that I couldn't but this..." She hesitated then threw her head back in exasperation, "Come on, Subaru! You're telling me that this girl, who looks just like the witch and whom I've never met before in my life, is our dear friend. You're telling me that *everyone* except for you has had their memories modified by some unknown power for some unknown reason. This is a *lot* that you're asking me to buy and you don't have *any* proof of any it!"

Subaru couldn't respond.

Felt looked sad and walked out to the driver's platform casting Subaru one last worried look.

She exited the trailer and left Subaru alone with Emilia and the spirits.

Subaru fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands.

"Hey, Subaru, are you alright?" Puck asked drifting down to him.

"No, Puck," Subaru whispered, "I'm not sure that I've ever been less alright in my life. The world has forgotten all about Emilia and even our friends are ready to turn on her. I don't know what to do."

Subaru felt a soft paw touching his face and looked up.

"Look, Subaru," Puck said, "I have no idea what's going on here but I *know* that we'll figure it out. Betty and I are with you. Remember, you're not just our partner, you're our family. We're on *your* side, no matter what."

Subaru started to cry and cuddled the little cat against his face.

"It's alright, Subaru," The cat said patting his cheek. "You'll straighten this out. You always do."

Subaru hugged the cat tightly.

"Wow. I can't wait for Betty to wake up," Puck mused, "I wonder what she'll think of all this."

Subaru actually chuckled at that thought.

Subaru noticed that Puck was looking at the sleeping half-elf.

"Anything coming back to you, Puck?" Subaru asked hopefully.

"Not really, Subaru. Sorry," He said, "I mean, she *does* seem kind of familiar but I can't place her."

Subaru sighed.

"So tell me, Subaru," Puck continued, "Do I have any kind of relationship with this 'Emilia' person?"

Subaru smiled sadly, "You've been her partner for about seven years, ever since you met in the Elior forest. You call her 'Lia' and you think of yourself as her father. When you and I first met, you threatened to kill me because I was having lewd thoughts about your precious daughter."

Puck gaped up at him, "Wow, Subaru. That's... that's seriously a lot to take in. I mean, I know that you're not lying to me but I'm not sure that I believe all that. Sorry."

"It's OK, buddy," Subaru whispered cradling the cat, "I know that it's a lot to absorb."

"'Lia,' huh? I like that name. But you're the only person I've ever formed a contract with, Subaru. You're 'that person,' not the girl," Puck said.

"I'll accept that for now, Puck," Subaru acknowledged, "Because God knows the only people who could love you as much as Emilia are Beatrice and me."

Some time later, Beatrice stirred.

"Beako," Subaru whispered picking up the tiny spirit, "Are you alright?"

Beatrice rubbed her eyes, "Betty is very tired, in fact. This barrier is most unpleasant."

"No more barrier, Beako," Subaru said cradling the little spirit close against his chest, "We got out."

"Well, that's good, I suppose," Beatrice murmured, "So why is Betty so tired?"

"Apparently when the barrier broke it drained everyone's mana," Subaru grumbled, "Because everything has to be unbelievably difficult when we're involved."

"You were in a real bad way, Betty," Puck commented drifting down into Beatrice's arms, "Your mana was almost empty!"

"That explains why Betty is so tired, I suppose," Beatrice sighed, cuddling Puck with a contented smile.

"Yeah," Puck yawned, "It took most of my mana to stabilize you so I'm feeling pretty drained myself. It might be a few weeks before we're back to normal."

"Beako," Subaru hesitated, "Do you remember Emilia?"

"Who is Emilia, I suppose?" Beatrice asked absently.

Subaru sighed.

"Sorry, Subaru," Puck said.

Subaru nodded.

Beatrice gave Subaru a puzzled look, "Who is 'Emilia,' in fact?"

Subaru sighed and pointed at the sleeping elf behind him.

"Hm," Beatrice said curiously, "Where did the elf come from?"

Oh my God, this is terrible!

"She's my fiancée, Beako," Subaru sighed. "But nobody seems to remember her."

Beatrice gaped at him, "Subaru is getting married? Why didn't he tell Betty, in fact?!"

Subaru sighed and shook his head, "Beako, you've met Emilia many times. You've lived with her at the manor and while we were in the capitol. She slept in our bed. But something has happened and now nobody remembers who she is. Beako, do you know any kind of magic that could shift people's memories around like that?"

Beatrice stared at him open-mouthed.

Subaru chuckled sadly, "I'm not making this up, Beako. Emilia was precious to all of us in different ways. But now, nobody remembers who she is. Everything that she did is now being ascribed to someone else. Can you think of anything that could do that?"

Beatrice frowned, "Magic can erase memories I suppose but Betty has never heard of any magic that could remove an individual from existing memories and then cover it up."

"Yeah, it's not just that people don't remember Emilia, they're attributing things that she did to me and other people," Subaru added.

Beatrice shook her head, "Magic can not do this, I suppose. This is reality warping. Only an Authority grants such power."

"And that means that the Archbishops are involved," Subaru grumbled, "I don't suppose you know which one?"

Beatrice shook her head.

"Well, that's not much help," Subaru sighed. He thought it over frowning, "Betty, so Roswaal says that I have an Authority. Do you have any idea how they work?"

Betty cocked her head.

"I mean," Subaru tried to put his thoughts into words, "If an Authority did this to Emilia, is there anyway that I could use my Authority to undo it?"

"Wait a second! Subaru, when did you get an Authority?!" Puck gasped.

Beatrice shook her head, "Betty doesn't know much about how Authorities work, I suppose. Betty just knows that they are vastly more powerful than any other form of magic and follow far fewer rules."

Subaru leaned back against Emilia's couch with Beatrice in his arms and Puck in hers, "Everything always comes back to the Authorities for good or for bad," He muttered.

"Authorities are unique to the user. No two Authorities manifest in quite the same way, I suppose," Beatrice replied, "Although some manifestations have general features in common. The power of an Authority is the power to ignore the laws of physics and magic in some way. Which Authority did Roswaal say that you had?"

"Pride," He answered.

Beatrice deflated slightly, "Betty had hoped that it might have been Greed, I suppose," She whispered.

"Why? What difference would that make?" Subaru asked.

Beatrice just shook her head.

"That seems kind of weird, Subaru," Puck mused, "I mean, you've got your flaws; mostly dealing with being really weird and occasionally kind of dumb but I don't think arrogance is one of your core traits."

"Gee. Thanks, Puck," Subaru grumbled, "Alright. So as unhappy as it may be to discover that I am a witch, maybe it will let me reverse whatever is going on here. We just need to figure out how. Roswaal said that my Authority would grow more powerful over time. He said that I'd develop an affinity for it and learn to control it but I don't know what that means."

"I've heard that Authorities become more powerful as the wielder succumbs to their own flaws, Subaru," Puck replied.

"So basically if I want to unlock the full power of the Authority of Pride and bend it to my will, I just need to become *more* arrogant," Subaru rubbed his forehead with a rueful chuckle.

"Betty thinks that the very idea of a mortal gaining control of an Authority is already arrogant, in fact," She said.

Garfiel, Felt, and the twins had left Subaru and the spirits entirely alone. Subaru didn't like to think about what they might be saying out front.

In any event, he had several hours to carefully consider what he was going to say to Emilia.

Unfortunately, he hadn't come to any brilliant conclusions when she finally stirred and her eyes fluttered open.

"Subaru," She whispered.

"Emilia," He answered quickly taking her hand.

Her gaze moved to over his shoulder where he knew that Beatrice and Puck were sitting.

"Puck!" She gasped and her smile was like the sun coming up. She reached out to him her arms wide.

Subaru knew without turning around that Puck wasn't moving or even smiling at her. He was looking at Emilia with doubt.

Emilia's face flickered, "Daddy?" She whispered, "What's wrong?"

"Emilia," Subaru said taking a deep breath, "Just... Just look at me for a minute, OK?"

Emilia turned her attention back toward Subaru, her brow creased with worry.

"Listen, um, I have a lot to tell you and none of it is going to be easy to hear," Subaru said sadly, "So I need you to be very brave right now and to remember that we are in this together and, no matter how bad things get, we will find a way to fix them."

Emilia stared at Subaru, seemingly willing herself not to look at anything else. She swallowed hard, "Alright."

"The first thing I need to tell you is that we've discovered that the Kingdom seems to have run out of dragon blood. They don't have any more to give us for the forest," Subaru said squeezing her hand gently.

Emilia gasped. She stared at Subaru her face contorting in horror.

"Deep breath, Emilia," Subaru instructed, "We don't have a plan for healing the forest right now but that doesn't mean that we're going to give up. I have very good reason to believe that there is another way to save the forest so I want you to try to stay calm right now. I... I actually have something worse that I need to tell you."

"Worse?" Emilia asked in shock.

Oh my God. How do you even break bad news like this to someone? Telling her that she was dying of cancer and had days to live would be easier than this!

"Emilia, I think that you've been placed under some kind of strange curse," Subaru said gently.

"A curse? Like what?"

He took a deep breath, "I'm afraid that... everyone's memories of you have been damaged. Nobody except me... remembers who you are."

Emilia's jaw dropped. She stared at Subaru as if waiting for him to say 'just kidding.' Subaru could only sit there and squeeze her hand.

Finally, Emilia looked at Puck who was resting in Beatrice's arms looking uncertain.

"Daddy?" She asked plaintively.

"Um," Puck muttered, "Hello, Emilia. It's very nice to meet you."

Emilia's mouth worked but no sound came out.

"Puck," Subaru coaxed as Emilia held onto his hand like a lifeline, "This is the daughter I was telling you about: Emilia. You've had a contract with her for about seven years now."

Puck drifted out of Beatrice's arms and perched on Subaru's shoulder.

"Um, I don't know about that, Subaru. I know that you're not lying to me but I never had a contract with anyone except you. Beatrice and I were waiting for you for four hundred years. There wasn't anyone else before we met," Puck told him awkwardly.

Emilia's face crumbled and she began to cry.

Subaru pulled her into a tight hug and she buried her face in his chest.

"I know, Mili," Subaru whispered to her, "I know how hard this is but we're going to fix it. I promise. We're going to break this curse and everything is going to go back to the way it was."

"Subaru! This is like a nightmare!" Emilia sobbed.

"Yeah, it is," Subaru agreed as Emilia wept, "Listen, Emilia, I know that I'm a poor substitute for Puck but I'm still here for you. We are a team and this nightmare has trapped both of us and we are going to get out of it together."

Emilia slowly stopped sobbing. "Yes. Yes, we will," She said firmly, "As long as you and I are together, we can do anything."

"That's my Mili!" Subaru cheered.

Emilia took a few deep breaths and seemed to steady herself. She picked her head off of Subaru's chest, "Hello, Puck," Emilia said, fighting to put a smile on a face that was still wet with tears, "I'm Emilia and it is very nice... to meet you. And you as well, Beatrice."

The spirits looked at Emilia curiously.

"I *feel* like I know you from somewhere but I can't place it...", Puck grumbled sounding annoyed.

"Betty does *not* remember you but if Betty's Subaru likes you then Betty will accept you as well," Beatrice added.

Emilia almost laughed, "Thank you, Beatrice. I appreciate that."

"OK, guys," Subaru said, "We have a number one priority right now: to undo whatever happened to Emilia."

"Undoing something that we can't even define is a complicated task, I suppose," Beatrice replied.

"No argument," Subaru said, "But we know that normal magic couldn't have done this so it had to be an Authority, right? Could it be anything else?"

Beatrice thought about it then shook her head, "Assuming that this 'Emilia' did not simply bewitch you to believe that she is your friend when in fact she is not-"

"Hey!" Subaru objected.

"Then no. To cause people to not only forget a person but to associate their actions as being done by another so seamlessly goes beyond magic, I suppose. This is reality warping and only Authorities give their wielders such power to deform the laws of nature and magic. This also explains why you may have been unaffected: your Authority may have protected you from the other Authority's power," Beatrice finished.

"Yeah. Hey, Subaru, can we go back to that for a second?" Puck asked plaintively, "Since when did you acquire an Authority? And why didn't you ever tell us?"

"I'd like an answer to that question too, Subaru," Emilia agreed.

Subaru sighed, "OK, so the full story is that I never told you I had an Authority because I didn't even realize it meant anything. Until Roswaal brought it up I just thought an Authority was some kind of fancy title. You know, something to group abilities like *Indomitable* and...", He trailed off.

"And what?" Emilia asked.

Reason and Judgment...

Subaru hesitated and shrugged, "You know, just my magic," He finished lamely, "Anyway I got my Authority a few minutes after I came to this world, although it took me a while to figure out how to use its abilities. Roswaal claimed that it has way more power than I've tapped into so far. Maybe even enough to un-warp Emilia's memories or to restore the Elixir forest."

"Um, so, Subaru, is fixing that forest something that we're trying to do now?" Puck asked in a confused voice.

Emilia and Subaru exchanged a weary look and both sighed.

"Yeah, buddy," Subaru replied, "Emilia was born in the Elixir forest and the whole reason that I even joined the royal selection in the first place was to help Emilia acquire the dragon's blood so that we could heal the forest," He finished sadly.

"Oh! So that's why we were doing all of this!" Puck replied, "Huh. I always figured that you were just trying to become King because you were a really nice guy who wanted to make things better for everyone."

Subaru snorted, "Yeah, glad I could correct that misconception."

"Subaru is a *wonderful* person who is always trying to help others, even me. Puck was not incorrect," Emilia interjected, giving Subaru an annoyed look.

"See? Like I said," Puck agreed with Emilia.

"If Betty could get this conversation back on track," Beatrice said in a tone of annoyance, "Betty remembers Capella telling us that the blood was all gone right before Betty collapsed. She claimed to have *drunk* it all if Betty remembers correctly."

"She *drank* the blood?" Emilia asked in astonishment.

"You didn't meet Capella, Emilia. Believe me, drinking blood is something I'd assume is not terribly unusual for her," Subaru grumbled.

"Then the blood is all gone," Emilia whispered.

"If we believe her," Beatrice sniffed, "*Do* we believe her, in fact, Subaru?"

"It makes sense," Subaru sighed, "After all, if the kingdom still had the blood, why wouldn't they have used it to heal the King and his family?"

"Good point," Puck noted.

"But," Emilia began, "Can't we just ask for more blood once we reform the pact with the dragon?"

"According to Capella," Subaru replied, "The powerful blood we need to lift the curse isn't just any dragon blood: it needs to come from a dragon's last heartbeat. Then again I'm not sure that if I'm as willing to believe her about that-

"Betty can confirm it, I suppose" Beatrice grumbled, "The strongest blood, the curse breaking blood, must come from a dragon's death."

"OK, so how did the kingdom get any in the first place? The dragon was still alive, I thought," Subaru asked.

"Likely from killing another dragon, I suppose" Beatrice shrugged.

Subaru sighed, "OK, well. Fixing everyone's memories of Emilia is our first priority right now but can anyone think of other approaches to break the curse on the forest? Maybe a talisman or a spell or something? I *really* don't want to have to go dragon hunting."

"Subaru!" Emilia protested, "We can't kill a sentient being just because we need their blood!"

"Emilia, I very much doubt that we could kill a dragon *period*, no matter what our motivations were. So can anyone think of another way to break the curse on the forest without relying on dragon blood?" Subaru asked.

Beatrice and Puck shared a long glance and then shook their heads, "Sorry, Subaru," Puck replied, "But I don't think that anything but the Dragon blood would work on a curse of that magnitude."

"OK," Subaru shook his head, "So maybe dragon hunting *is* in our future. Is there any way that an Authority could break the curse?"

"Authorities warp reality. There is no reason in principle an Authority couldn't do this, but the wielder of an Authority generally has no say in the form their Authority takes, I suppose" Beatrice replied.

"Um, care to explain that a little bit more, Beako?" Subaru asked.

Beatrice frowned thoughtfully, "Reinhard van Astrea has great power, in fact. Reinhard would be powerful enough to heal any wound in an ally. Reinhard can *not* heal wounds, however. This is not the form his power takes."

"Got it," Subaru sighed, "So my Authority so far has taken a form that has nothing to do with breaking curses. That might be the end of the story but Roswaal implied that over time I would be able to control my Authority."

Beatrice stared at Subaru frowning, "Few ever develop the power and rapport to command their Authority consciously, I suppose. The Witch of Envy was said to have come close," Beatrice mused, her gaze flickering toward Emilia, "Betty has also heard stories about a powerful witch of the ancient world who completely mastered her relatively weak Authority and could reshape reality to her liking at will."

"That sounds like a nice power!" Subaru said, "You know anything else about this witch?"

Beatrice shook her head, "Not even her name, I suppose. She was considered a secret among secrets even when Betty's mother was alive. There is very little information about her."

Subaru frowned, "Well, let's keep our eyes open for any more information then. If this witch was able to do all that, then there must be a way for me to do it too. That might be our only chance to save Emilia and the Forest."

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, looking worried. "Are you sure about this?"

"About what?"

"About using your Authority," Emilia said. "This is witchcraft! It's dangerous. It could do bad things to you."

"I've been using it since I got here without much trouble," Subaru shrugged.

I think that's not technically a lie.

"The half-elf makes a valid point, I suppose," Beatrice said folding her arms, "Many people who acquire such black magic are mastered by their Authority rather than the converse. They are devoured by the power and it twists their minds."

"OK, that sounds bad, how do we avoid that?" Subaru asked.

The spirits looked at each other, "Honestly? I have no idea, Subaru," Puck replied, "There isn't all that much information on the topic of Authorities."

"Not even in your library?" Subaru asked Beatrice.

Beatrice glanced away looking embarrassed, "Betty's library is not complete, I suppose" She murmured under her breath.

"Come again?"

Betty bit her lip, "Mother left Betty only some of her precious tomes, in fact. Her personal reflections on the greater mysteries of magic were secured elsewhere."

"Where's that?"

Betty snorted, her face glowing red, "Betty doesn't know, I suppose!"

Subaru very carefully hid a smile, "Well, we'll just have to find them then! Those books might be the key to solving all of our problems. Besides, I'd feel bad if your mother's books didn't wind up in your library, Beako."

Beatrice frowned at Subaru thoughtfully, "Yes," She said after a moment, "Mother's legacy belongs in Betty's library, in fact" She agreed.

"OK," Subaru said clapping his hands together, "So the plan is to figure out a way to use my Authority to restore Emilia's memories and heal the forest. This is a dark magic that is incredibly dangerous and as likely to destroy me as it is to help us. We need to learn how to use it and we have a few angles to follow in that regard: We have the books on magic, although nobody has any idea where they might be located, and we have the legend of a witch of terrifying power whose name we don't even know. Does that about sum it up?"

Emilia stared at Subaru, "Subaru, is all this funny to you?!"

"Funny? No. I'm actually trying to reassure everybody by acting confident right now," Subaru clarified, "It's just kind of hard to act confident when we're dealing with all this. I thought when we escaped the Sanctuary that we could take it easy for a while. Now the world is throwing all this shit at us!"

Emilia sighed, "Nobody even remembers what I did, do they? I fought so hard to complete the trials and save the villagers and now nobody even knows who I am."

"I do," Subaru said seriously, "You're still a hero to me, Mili!"

Emilia smiled sadly, "Thank you, Subaru. Maybe that should be enough but..." She looked at the two spirits who still regarded her skeptically.

"We're going to fix it!" He promised taking her hand, "We're going to bring everyone's memories back and Puck is going to drive us both crazy for several days with how guilty he feels for having ever forgotten you!"

"Hey! Subaru, leave me out of this pep talk!" Puck complained.

Emilia laughed.

"OK, guys," Subaru said leading Rem, Felt, and Garfiel into the trailer while the earth dragons rested. Ram had been brought inside and placed back on the couch, still unconscious. "I want you all to meet Emilia."

Emilia sat there looking apprehensive.

Felt, who had become a dear friend to Emilia during their time in the Sanctuary, now looked at her without recognition. Felt stared at Emilia's hair and ears and bit her lip. Felt's gaze kept flickering back to Subaru as if asking if he was really sure about this.

Rem, who had always been kind and polite to Emilia, if not friendly, had a face as hard as iron. Her arms were tightly folded across her chest. Emilia saw that Rem had brought her mace with her for this introduction.

Garfiel scowled at Emilia but not much had changed there. His gaze was doubtful when it strayed to Subaru.

Emilia glanced at the spirits who sat on the couch across from her looking equally unconvinced. Especially Puck.

Emilia took a deep breath, "It's wonderful to see you all again," She said standing up and giving them all a small curtsy, "My name is Emilia. Just Emilia."

Rem glowered at her. Felt and Garfiel glanced at Subaru uncertainly.

"Hey, Subaru," Felt muttered, "You're... sure that you know this girl?"

"OK," Subaru began, "I know that this situation is really weird for all concerned but it is the truth. Something has erased Emilia from everyone's memories. We need to figure out a way to undo this."

Felt and Garfiel looked at each other helplessly for a long moment.

Finally, Felt shook her head, "OK, boss, this is all," Felt hesitated and sighed, "*Really* kind of hard to believe, but I'm on your team. If you say that... 'Emilia' is our friend then I'm on board. What do we do about this?"

Garfiel looked unconvinced. He squinted at Emilia and growled, "Are you the one the Witch Cult destroyed my home to rescue?"

Emilia was absolutely stunned by this question but she shook it off, "Garf, whatever the Witch Cult wanted with me, I very much doubt that they intended to do me any favors," She said firmly.

Garfiel looked startled, "Wait! You know my name?"

Emilia took a deep breath, "Of course I do, Garf. We just spent two weeks together. Every day I'd come out of the tomb in tears after failing the trials, you'd say something about me being weak and pathetic, and Felt would threaten you."

Garfiel blinked and scratched his head, looking uncertain.

"Um..., well it's nice to meet you..., Emilia," Felt mumbled.

"It's good to see you again too, Felt," Emilia smiled.

Rem glowered at Emilia suspiciously.

"OK," Subaru continued, "So the spirits and I have been talking and it looks like the only possible explanation is that the Archbishops used their Authorities to modify everyone's memories for some unexplained reason."

"Hang on, what makes you think they did it, Captain?" Garfiel asked.

Subaru shrugged, "Because according to Beako, normal magic couldn't do it. And if it *was* done by an Authority then that explains why I might be immune to the effects."

"You reek of witchcraft," Rem interjected with a scowl at Emilia.

Emilia's eyes widened.

Subaru cocked his head at Rem, "Really? You never said that before."

Rem gave Subaru an annoyed look.

Subaru spread his hands defensively, "Rem, I'm just saying that you've had plenty of encounters with Emilia and you never commented on her smelling like a witch until now. I doubt you would have kept it a secret. You tried to kill me a few hours after we met because I smelled like the witch."

"Whoah!" Garfiel said in shock, "Seriously, Rem?" He asked.

Rem glared at Subaru.

"We've more or less worked it out, Garf" Subaru twitted, "Anyway, maybe that the new aroma has something to do with Emilia passing the trials?" He asked Rem.

Rem folded her arms and thought about it, "Master Otto did smell very foul after he emerged from the tomb," She admitted.

"Alright, so let's assume that answers *that* question for now. We have enough other problems to deal with," Subaru replied.

"So, what's the plan, boss?" Felt asked looking at Emilia dubiously, "Now that we've got ourselves a witch, what are we going to do with her?"

"OK, first of all, let's cool it on the witch talk?" Subaru sighed, "Beyond that, our plan is pretty much the same as before: The Witch Cult is after us and they're *really* pissed off so personally, I do not want to see them again right now."

Felt blanched, "Bad news, boss!" She shouted pointing out the trailer's back door.

A group of six men in purple hooded robes were running inhumanly fast up the road.

"OK, Puck, Beako look after the Ram, Felt, and Emilia. Garf and Rem, we'll deal with these losers," Subaru instructed.

"Alright!" Garfiel cheered.

"Try not to let any of them get away or they might bring back reinforcements!" Subaru yelled as he leapt out of the trailer and onto the gravel road.

Garfiel charged out with a wild whoop and a feral grin on his face. He took a position to Subaru's right. Rem stood on Subaru's left with a stern look as she shook out her chain mace.

The cultists were armed with long knives. As they charged, Subaru deliberately stepped forward to invite them to focus their attacks on him.

The six all sprang at Subaru stabbing at his torso but Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and their knives glanced off. The cultists seemed baffled and uncertain of what to do next. Subaru took advantage of this to deliver a punch that shattered a cultist's head in a geyser of blood. His triangular hood turned red and collapsed inward like a rotten tomato.

Subaru choked back a retch as he turned to help Garfiel and Rem.

Garfiel effortlessly grabbed two cultists by the throat and smashed their heads together, shattering their skulls like dropped pumpkins.

Rem swung her mace at a cultist's chest crushing it and then spun around driving her mace into another cultist's face with a crunch.

The last cultist tried to turn and run but Rem's mace clipped his ankle, sending the cultist crashing down onto the ground. Before he could even move, Garfiel grabbed the cultist's head and slammed it face first into the road with terrific force.

He lay still.

"Huh," Garfiel snorted, "You know, Captain, after dealing with Roy, my magnificent self was expecting to have more fun with the Cult than that."

"You may still get your wish, Garf, if the Archbishops find us!" Subaru replied. "Everyone get back inside!" Subaru said already running back to the trailer followed by Rem.

Garfiel looked confused and he had to hurry to catch up.

"Rem, have the earth dragons had a long enough rest?" Subaru asked.

"No, but we had better get moving anyway," Rem answered tersely. She ran back to the driver's platform followed by Felt.

"Hey, Captain, do you really think the Archbishops are that close?" Garfiel asked.

"I don't know but I *do* know what will happen when that group of cultists doesn't report in so we better get the hell out of here," Subaru explained.

Garfiel made a face. "Sounds good to me, Captain," Garfiel replied racing out to the driver's platform.

Subaru paused to look at Emilia and the spirits, "Are you guys OK?"

They nodded but Emilia looked worried.

"OK, wait here. I'll be right back," Subaru said heading out onto the driver's platform.

Rem quickly spurred the tired earth dragons into a run which they did with a groan.

"Shit, Captain, maybe I shouldn't leave Ram in there with the witec-"

"Puck and Beako will watch Ram, Garf," Subaru interrupted with annoyance.

With the sun setting behind him, Subaru peered down the road, "Are there any turn offs around here? It would be really useful to get off the road and onto another one before those flunkies are missed by their bosses."

"If I remember correctly," Rem said tersely, "A few miles ahead the road forks: one path goes to the capitol and one leads to Miseri city."

"I'm not sure that there's anything in Miseri city for us, but we do need to change course," Subaru grumbled weighing his options.

"There's a third possibility," Rem said, "There is also a broad meadow near the fork. Merchants sometimes cut across the meadow and follow a few rough roads to reach the king's highway back to the capitol. This trailer may be too large to take that road, however."

"Lets do it," Subaru decided, "If the road gets too narrow then Garf and I will just smash down a few trees."

Garfiel laughed, "That sounds awesome, Captain! You know, if I wasn't homeless and running for my frickin life right now, this would totally be fun!"

Subaru rolled his eyes, *Was I ever this immature?*

Felt looked at Garfiel with weary amusement.

Subaru chuckled, "First off, you're not homeless, Garf. As long as you're with us, we'll take care of you. We'll help you land someplace where you'll be happy. And as far as running for our lives goes... yeah, I guess I can't really argue with that one," Subaru admitted.

Garfiel laughed and playfully punched Subaru's shoulder. Subaru barely swallowed a cry of pain.

Damn, this kid is strong! I need to use Indomitable if he's going to do that again!

"OK, I'm going to go check on Emilia. Call me when we reach the fork," Subaru said going back inside.

Emilia was still sitting on her couch while Betty sat across from her cradling Puck. All three parties seemed markedly uncomfortable.

Subaru sat down beside Emilia and took her hand.

Emilia smiled at him but Puck and Beatrice both seemed annoyed by his choice of couches.

"OK, I don't know about everyone else but I've had just about all the fights today I can handle. I am ready to call it a night," Subaru sighed closing his eyes for a moment.

Subaru wasn't sure when he fell asleep.

"Captain! Wake up, you lazy bastard! I think we're being followed!" Garfiel yelled.

Subaru staggered out of an uneasy sleep. It was dark outside, "What's going on?"

"Someone's tailing us and he's catching up quick! He jumping around like Roy was!" Garfiel growled standing at the back door of the trailer as it raced along the road at breakneck speed.

Emilia sat next to Subaru looking frightened and the tired spirits sat across from her.

Subaru sprang up and leapt to the door. In the distance he saw a small thin figure with long scraggly hair leaping after the trailer, "Ley," Subaru growled.

"Ley, huh? Captain, you said he's the easy one, right?" Garfiel muttered.

"Did you think Roy was easy?" Subaru grumbled, "Assume this guy is worse."

Garfiel stared at Subaru wide eyed. When Subaru didn't say 'just kidding,' Garfiel swallowed hard.

"How far until we reach that turn off Rem mentioned?" Subaru asked.

"Captain, we took it! We went clear across a meadow and through the woods for an hour! I even walked behind us to make sure we weren't leaving any obvious trail!" Garfiel growled.

"What?" Subaru said, "Well, how the fuck did he find us?"

"I don't fucking know!" Garfiel snapped.

"The dragons can't go much further!" Rem called from the front.

"That's fine, Rem," Subaru yelled back, "We aren't getting away like this anyway! Give Felt the reins and get back here. Felt, give the dragons a rest."

Rem raced into the back, mace in hand as the carriage jostled to a stop.

"OK, both of you be quiet!" Subaru instructed Garfiel and Rem as the bouncing Ley came closer, "I don't care how much you hate the Witch Cult, we are in no shape for another fight right now! I'm going to try to talk us out of this. Stay here and wait for it to get physical before you jump in."

"You really think that will work, Captain?" Garfiel asked skeptically.

Subaru shrugged, "I don't know, Garf, but it's worth a try at least! I've met Ley and I bet he remembers the fight I had with Regulus. He may not be willing to fight me all alone. Beyond that, he doesn't seem all that bright. Maybe if I tell him that I'm following instructions from whoever runs the Cult, he'll buy it. Ley seems to be a little confused about which side I'm on."

"I can sympathize," Rem muttered.

"Oh, go bury it, Rem!" Subaru snarled.

Subaru swaggered out the back of the trailer with a confident smirk as Ley bounded up to him. When Ley saw Subaru, his frog like face creased with confusion, "Pride?"

"Hey there, Ley," Subaru replied with a smirk, "I assume that you're here to congratulate me on capturing the elf."

Ley squinted up at him, "You captured her? I thought the elf got away."

"Who told you that?" Subaru said in feigned confusion.

"Capella," Ley replied.

Subaru scoffed, "You're listening to *Capella* now?" Subaru asked incredulously, "Why? You know how she gets. The little bitch threw a tantrum when she didn't get her hands on the elf personally but I just told her: 'Finders keepers.'"

Ley snorted, "Bet that didn't go over too well," He said sympathetically, "No wonder she went bananas. You know she turned us all loose to hunt down the elf?"

Subaru sighed, "Is she still throwing a tantrum? It's been hours since we split up! She hasn't gotten a grip on herself yet?"

"Nah. She and Regulus are both livid about some sorcerer who led them on a chase and then disappeared," Ley said.

Roswaal got away, huh? That's good. In theory.

"I'd buy him a beer if I knew who he was," Subaru replied, "Anyone who aggravates those two is a friend of mine."

"Now that's the truth, Pride!" Ley giggled, "Hey, what's your name anyway? I can't just keep calling you 'Pride.'"

"Well, I'm willing to accept 'Great One,' 'Your Majesty,' 'My Liege,' 'The Glorious One,' or 'Subaru.' Take your choice," Subaru deadpanned.

Ley laughed out loud, "Yeah, you're proud. I get it. OK, 'Subaru' then. Hey, who are all those guys? Are they part of the Order?"

"They work for me," Subaru shrugged, "Meaning that so long as I'm following instructions so are they."

"Fair enough," Ley scratched his head with a sigh, "Look, I'm going to head back then. I've wasted way too much time running around tonight on Capella's say-so and I've got nothing to show for it. I'm getting hungry."

"Try telling her to suck you off if she wants you to follow her instructions. That's what I do," Subaru said carelessly, "Believe me, she turns all kinds of fascinating colors. I'm not sure it's because she's angry or aroused though and that worries me," He added looking uncomfortable.

"Fuck, no! I'm not that brave, Pride! You and Regulus might be able to tell her off but can you imagine what she'd do to me?" Ley asked, "She'd turn me into a pile of furry caterpillars."

OK, so I was right about the power scale for these freaks.

"Yeah, fair point," Subaru agreed, "So does that clear up everything for you?"

"Almost. The only thing that confuses me is where are you taking the elf? The cathedral is the other way."

Oh shit. What do I say to this?

"The cathedral? I was told that we were supposed to take her to the old temple," Subaru said.

"What's that?"

"Capella didn't tell you about it?" Subaru asked.

"She doesn't tell me anything except where to go and who to kill!" Ley mourned, "Can I be there the next time you make her suck you off? I'd like to see that. Err... from a very safe distance."

"I'll see what I can do!" Subaru laughed, "Anyway, why don't you go sync up with the little bitch and see what the next

step is. I'm guessing I'll see you at the temple later."

"OK, sounds good," Ley yawned.

Subaru's heart leapt.

"Just let me check the Gospel first," Ley added pulling a small black book out of his pocket.

He flipped through a few pages looking puzzled, "Weird. It's still telling me to take the elf. Any idea what's that about?"

Subaru shrugged, "I couldn't tell you."

"Maybe you should check your Gospel just to be sure," Ley suggested.

Subaru hesitated for a split second, "I didn't bring my Gospel with me. Honestly, I'm surprised that you did! This mission could have gotten rough. Imagine the Gospel being damaged!" He said in feigned horror.

Ley scratched his chin and thought for a moment, "Sorry, Subaru, but if the Gospel tells me to take the elf, I think I'm going to have to take her. Maybe your instructions are out of date. I think I'm going to have to insist."

"Insist?" Subaru echoed, "Really?"

Ley nodded.

"I respect your determination to follow instructions, Ley. I just find it rather interesting that you think I'd abandon my own instructions," Subaru said with quiet menace stepping closer to Ley, "I hope you're not planning to get physical about this. You might vaguely recall what happened when Regulus and I had that little disagreement."

Ley flashed him a sharp-tooth smile, "True but the Gospel wouldn't send me down a blind alley," He replied.

Ley delivered a roundhouse kick to Subaru's jaw but Subaru managed to trigger *Indomitable* just in time.

Ley looked stunned. Subaru was not only was unhurt but he hadn't even been budged by a kick that could have shattered stone.

Subaru tried to punch Ley's face but the stringy boy cartwheeled away drawing his long daggers.

Subaru saw Rem and Garfiel leap out of the trailer to flank him. He quickly glanced behind him and saw Puck and Beatrice rushed out to help them leaving Emilia and Felt standing on the back platform of the trailer.

"This isn't going to end well for you, Ley," Subaru warned him, "Why don't you just get lost before you get hurt?"

Ley grinned at him, "I may not be Regulus, Subaru, but don't underestimate me!"

Emilia stood by helplessly as the group fought Ley.

Garfiel and Rem kept trying to surround the Archbishop but Ley always leapt away almost casually. Ley was remarkably acrobatic in a way that put Roy to shame, spinning and rolling away from every attack. Everyone was flailing at the grotesque boy and almost never striking a solid blow. Even the spirits couldn't pin him down. Puck unleashed a barrage of ice crystals but Ley spun, flipped and cartwheeled around them. Beatrice tried to grab Ley with shadowy tentacles but he leapt over her head and her tentacles accidentally tangled Garfiel.

Ley would have quickly won the fight except for Subaru. Each time Ley tried to go on the offensive, Subaru was right in front of him and Ley quickly backed off knowing that his daggers were no good against Subaru.

Ley wasn't willing to fight Subaru directly after he'd seen Regulus fail to kill him. He wanted to pick off the others and grab Emilia.

I have to do something! Emilia thought desperately, *But what? I don't have my connection to Puck anymore so my magic is all gone!*

Emilia shook her head, *Don't think like that!* She admonished herself. *My connection to Puck is eternal! He's my Father. No witchcraft can change that! Maybe... maybe if I reach down deep enough I can still touch that connection and use some of his magic...*

Ley seemed to be growing frustrated with the indecisive fight. As he leapt into the air to avoid Rem's mace, he spring-boarded off Garfield's chest and flung himself full speed at Emilia, planning to grab her and run.

Felt desperately pulled out her short knife.

Emilia was strangely calm. She felt the magic bubbling up inside her. She could still command Puck's magic. Probably not much of it, maybe only one ice crystal but if it hit Ley properly that would be enough to let the others finish Ley off.

As Subaru made a desperate grab for Ley, Emilia raised her palm toward the Archbishop and called upon the magic. She was not at all prepared for what happened. Puck's magic did not answer her.

Another magic did.

A massive bolt of frost blue light that could only be described as an avalanche of pure power erupted from her palm. It rushed out of her in a great burst like a river liberated by a bursting dam.

The shock of the magic flung Felt, who wasn't even in the direct line of fire, down onto the road knocking the wind out of her.

The light struck the shocked Ley full in the chest and sent him flying a full hundred feet away. The shock-wave Ley made as he flew at tremendous speed through Emilia's friends knocked them back and flung them all to the ground. Subaru who was closest to Ley ate a piece of the magic and was slammed face first into the road.

The wizened toad-like boy crashed onto the road where he tumbled and rolled until he finally came to a stop, his body covered in frost. The Archbishop looked up at Emilia with true fear in his eyes and fled.

Emilia panted for breath as she stared at her own hand in absolute shock.

A moment later Emilia noticed a small patch of ice underneath her and it was spreading. The ice patch crept slowly out from under her feet and a moment later a small shoot appeared in the ice growing upward. It grew an inch, two inches and then it grew leaves and a bulb on top. A moment later the bulb blossomed into a beautiful crystal flower made of ice.

Emilia stared at the beautiful crystal plant. As the frost kept spreading out and more and more flowers sprouted.

Felt and Subaru were groggily regaining their senses as the creeping ice spread underneath them and continued to sprout flowers.

Felt moaned, trying to figure out what had just happened. She dimly felt everything become cold around her.

A moment later she grabbed her hand with a scream.

She felt as if the bones in her hand were cracking, as if they was being torn apart from the inside.

Felt watched in absolute horror as a slender shaft of ice grew out of the back of her hand and became a blossoming ice flower three inches tall.

Felt screamed in pain as the slender delicate shaft of the frost blossom turned red, blood being drawn up the shaft until the blossom itself blushed bright crimson, dying itself red with her blood.

Felt screamed and pulled frantically at the blossom trying to uproot it but the blossom felt stronger than steel and Felt sensed that she would tear out her own bones before she ripped out the plant.

Felt felt to the ground screaming in agony as more blossoms began to sprout all over her body. They were each beautiful and delicate. They flowers bloomed gracefully and then quickly turned red, feeding on Felt's blood.

One was growing in her shoulder. Felt heard a sharp 'crack' sound as the roots dug deep inside her shoulder bone and tore it open the same way as a tree's roots split stone. The flower drank deep and turned red.

Felt was unable to do anything but writhe and scream as her entire body became a seedbed for the parasitic flowers. Felt dimly sensed Subaru screaming next to her as the flowers infested him as well.

The silver haired witch was at Subaru's side, saying something but Felt couldn't make it out. Her world dissolved into pure pain as the flowers kept growing and spreading all over her body.

Felt's hands felt as though they were on fire. Her fingernails split open as the flowers began to grow through the tips of her fingers. They grew in profusion over her torso and effortlessly ripped through her clothing. Felt was practically naked now but she barely noticed. She felt a slender shaft beginning to erupt from her tongue. Felt desperately opened her mouth wide to allow the tiny blossom to grow and flower without breaking through her teeth.

She stared up at the beautiful blossom protruding from her mouth and Felt thought she would go mad as she felt the flower sucking the blood out of her tongue. The sight of the perfectly beautiful crystal flower blooming above her, rising out of her own mouth and slowly turning red, seemed like the final bit of insanity she could cope with before her mind shattered into a million pieces.

Then she felt a blossom beginning to sprout from her left eye.

Emilia wrapped herself around Subaru, sobbing desperately, "Subaru!" She screamed shaking him.

She had no idea what to do. The frost flowers continued to bloom all around her as the frozen ground spread. She dimly realized that the frost flowers were beginning to grow up across the trailer, sticking straight out of the walls in complete defiance of gravity.

She watched in horror as a frost flower began to emerge from Subaru's cheek. She heard an audible cracking sound as its root sank deep into his cheekbone and Subaru howled in pain.

She saw Garfiel leap to Felt's side and pick her up. Felt was in convulsions now, her body looking less like a girl and more like a potato that was sprouting tubers.

As Emilia helplessly cradled Subaru's writhing body she sensed a shadow over head. Rem was leaping toward her, her

mace outstretched and descending toward them both.

"Get away from us!" Emilia screeched calling on her magic again and blasting everyone away, especially the tiny spirits who went flying.

Garfiel bounced against the ground struggling to shield Felt from the impact while Rem who was the main target was slammed into the road tumbling end over end.

Garfiel shook his head and got back to his feet, cradling the sobbing Felt. He looked hard at Emilia and Subaru, "Rem!" He shouted, "We can't help the Captain right now! Grab Ram! We need to get out of here!"

Rem glared at him but nodded and they both took off at a run toward the front of the trailer.

Emilia barely noticed them fleeing as her attention was completely fixated on the helplessly sobbing Subaru.

"Subaru! What do I do?" She begged him but Subaru was unconscious and the only impulses running through his brain right now were pain and agony as the flowers continued to rip his body apart and grow.

"What are you doing, you witch?!" Beatrice screamed at her as she and Puck flew over. Puck was surrounded by a swarm of ice crystals ready to fire and Beatrice was wrapped in a cloak of writhing shadow tentacles just waiting to be unleashed. Both spirits' faces twisted ferociously when they looked at Emilia.

"I don't know!" Emilia screamed back, "Puck, what do I do?!"

Puck hesitated, "This is your magic!" He snapped coldly, "Control it! Pull it back in!"

"Bubby!" Beatrice screamed in shock, "Are you going to let her-"

"Breaking the curse will take too long, Betty!" Puck snapped back, "Subaru and Felt will die if we don't get this spell under control immediately. Pull your power back in, witch!"

"I don't know how!" Emilia cried.

Betty hissed at her, "If you don't control your magic right now then Subaru will die. He will freeze to death and the frost flowers will drink his blood."

Emilia stared at Beatrice in horror then tried to focus as she had never focused before.

No one needed to tell Emilia that she had one chance to get this right before the spirits killed her to try and save Subaru. What was worse, if she didn't stop the magic right away, then it was very likely that her curse would indeed kill Subaru and Felt.

Emilia closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt the vast river of power surging out of her. Emilia had never imagined such magic. She couldn't believe she could possess so much power, much less control it, but Subaru needed her and failure was not an option.

She fought to pull the power back in. It resisted. Finally unleashed and free, the magic did not want to return to dormancy. She fought it tooth and nail and the magic slowly began to ebb. The frost flowers grew slower and finally stopped spreading altogether. The normal temperature returned to the area.

Emilia panted for breath. She looked down at Subaru. The flowers had stopped spreading but Subaru's body still looked like a madman's flowerbed. She brushed Subaru's cheek. His skin was pale and cold.

"Puck! You have to heal him!" Emilia begged.

Puck scowled at her and Emilia's mouth went dry. She could never have imagined Puck looking at her with such raw loathing.

"Bring him back inside the trailer!" The flying cat ordered, "We can't put him down on this ice!"

Emilia leapt to her feet with Subaru in her arms. She raced into the trailer to discover the floor was frozen here too and the frost flowers had spread everywhere. She gently deposited Subaru on the couch as the spirits raced up behind her.

Puck stared in horror at Subaru's ravaged body and began to cast a healing spell, the tiny cat glowing bright orange like a newborn sun.

Emilia heard a snarl and turned to see Beatrice scowling at her with pure hatred in her eyes, "The witch hurt Betty's Subaru! The witch will pay!"

Emilia recoiled as Beatrice raised a tiny hand that glowed with purple magic.

"Not now, Betty!" Puck shouted, "We need to heal Subaru! We can deal with the witch later!"

Beatrice ground her teeth glaring at Emilia but she turned away with a snarl and joined Puck's healing magic.

A short time later, Subaru was breathing more easily. The spirits had fought tooth and nail to melt the flowers and his wounds were beginning to mend from where the frost flower roots had bit into him. The trailer was still covered with frost flower blooms and, despite the warm air, they showed no sign of melting.

"He'll be alright, I suppose," Beatrice said glowering at Emilia.

Emilia bowed her head before the Great Spirit's rage, recognizing she deserved as much or worse.

Beatrice snarled at her, "Why did the witch hurt Betty's Subaru?!" She demanded.

Emilia flinched, "I didn't mean to," She said in a small voice.

"The witch almost killed Betty's Subaru by accident, I suppose?" Beatrice said sarcastically.

Emilia lowered her eyes and nodded.

Emilia sensed Puck floating above her and looked up. Emilia immediately started to cry. Never in her life had Puck looked down on her with such rage and contempt.

"How do we know that you didn't bewitch Subaru into thinking that you're his friend?" Puck demanded.

"I... don't know how to do that," Emilia whimpered.

"And Betty and Bubby are supposed to take your word for that, I suppose?" Beatrice snapped holding Subaru's hand and not looking at Emilia.

Emilia flinched, "Puck would know if I was lying..."

Puck glowered down at Emilia, "You hurt Subaru," He murmured as if pronouncing her doom, "Betty and I have waited to find Subaru for four hundred years. He is everything to us. If Subaru hadn't committed to trying to help you, I would have already turned you into ashes."

Emilia's tears wouldn't stop falling at hearing Puck speak to her like this.

Puck snarled at her, "You live only as long as Subaru doesn't decide that you're an enemy trying to trick him, but you have thrown away any trust that Betty and I had for you! If you so much as prick Subaru's finger then I will come for you myself *witch* and not even Subaru pleading with me for mercy will stop me from reducing you to dust! Are we understood?"

Emilia bowed her head and nodded, unable to control her tears.

Puck snorted and drifted back over to Betty and Subaru.

"Betty," Puck grumbled, "I'm going to go find the others and let them know that it's safe to come back to the trailer. We need to get moving. Keep an eye on the witch."

Emilia flinched at Puck referring to her this way.

"Betty thinks that is the most unnecessary thing her Bubby has ever said," She replied as Puck flew out the window.

Emilia walked on numb legs through the field of frost flowers growing in the trailer. She sank down on the couch that sat across from Subaru, buried her face in her hands and cried.

Beatrice looked at her with sheer loathing, "Bubby's words were not idle, little witch," Beatrice said in a cold voice, stroking Subaru's face, "Threaten our family again and we will not stay our hand."

Puck drifted high above the trailer getting a clear view of the surrounding area. The trailer sat in an enormous patch of frost and its body was festooned with crystal flowers growing out of every surface. The flowers had spread across the road and it was a minor miracle that none had infected the earth dragons in their harness.

Puck saw Garfiel, Felt and the twins gathered a short distance off the road and he flew over to them.

Garfield and Rem were standing there panting while Ram lay on the ground unconscious and Felt had blacked out with the red frost flowers still growing in profusion all over her body.

"Master Puck!" Rem cried, "Are you and Lady Beatrice alright?"

"Yeah, we're fine," Puck muttered drifting down to hover before them.

"What about the Captain?" Garfield demanded.

"He's out cold but he's stable. Betty and I broke the witch's curse and healed his wounds," Puck grumbled.

"Really? Hey, can you do the same for Rem and the shrimp?" Garfield asked.

Puck glanced at Rem. The maid had broken the flowers off her body but was still bleeding from deep wounds in several places, "Yeah, I can heal Rem."

Puck glowed bright orange as he used his magic to staunch Rem's bleeding and mend her wounds. A few moments later Rem was completely healed.

Rem dipped into a graceful curtsy, "Thank you, Master Puck."

"Yeah, don't mention it," Puck murmured absently as he drifted down to inspect Felt who seemed barely conscious or catatonic, "Wow, she's in bad shape. Maybe even worse than Subaru was. This might take a few minutes," He observed beginning to heal her wounds and melt the crimson flowers.

"What the fuck is that witch doing now?" Garfield demanded.

"Last I checked she was sitting on the couch sobbing," Puck grumbled, "Betty's watching her."

Garfiel stared at Puck, "Bullshit!"

"That's what she was doing," Puck replied.

"A witch that has enough power to do... whatever the hell she just did to all of us, is now curled up in a ball crying like a little girl? Bullshit!" Garfield proclaimed.

"It must be a ruse," Rem said wearily rubbing her sore limbs, "She's probably hoping to make us feel sorry for her."

"That's my guess," Puck agreed focusing on Felt.

"So what the hell are we going to do about it?" Garfield demanded, "This witch is fucking dangerous! She almost killed us and nearly destroyed the trailer!" Garfiel paused in realization, "She did it on purpose, didn't she?! She deliberately trapped us here so that the Archbishops coming for her would have time to catch up!"

"If the witch wanted to trap us here, I think there were more effective ways to do it," Rem replied.

"She didn't have any bad intent that I could detect," Puck admitted grudgingly, "Witches usually don't. They kill people out of indifference and carelessness. This particular witch is also too weak and incompetent to control her own magic and that puts all of us in its own kind of danger. And that's even ignoring the possibility that she's using her Authority to shield her thoughts from me."

"She might have failed to trap us this time but we should not give her a second opportunity," Rem replied, "Can we salvage the trailer?"

"That shouldn't be a problem. I looked it over before I came to find you," Puck said, "There aren't any flowers that might jam the wheels or something so the trailer should work the way it always does."

"Yeah, that's great and all, seriously," Garfiel grumbled sarcastically, "But I must ask again: What about the witch?" Garfield demanded Rem.

Rem gave him a tired look.

"We've got to do *something* about her!" Garfield cried, "We can't just drive off down the road with a monster sitting behind us! What is this, Michael and the Living Doll?"

Rem looked confused at the idiom.

"Do you have a suggestion?" Puck asked folding his arms.

"My suggestion is: Let's kill her!" Garfiel snapped.

Rem thought about it, "It certainly seems to be a sensible goal," She agreed, "But we didn't have much luck against her in the last fight."

"She took us by surprise!" Garfield snapped.

"That's true, Garf, but we'll only get one more chance to kill her. I doubt she'll let us escape so easily next time," Rem pointed out, "We should wait until Subaru and Sister wake up and then plan our attack together. The four of us and the Great Spirits should be able to finish off one witch."

"And what do we do with her until then?" Garfield demanded with a snap of his jaws, "Would you like me to make her a cup of tea?"

Puck shrugged, "Personally, Garf, I suggest you take your own advice: drive off down the road with the monster sitting behind you. Unless anyone has a better suggestion. The Sin Archbishops are still after us so we better keep moving. Betty and I will watch the witch to make sure she stays out of trouble but you all should stay out of the trailer anyway."

Puck glanced down at Felt. The flowers had all melted. Her wounds still looked inflamed and painful but she was breathing easier. Puck couldn't tell if she was unconscious or just shell-shocked.

"Ugh!" Garfield growled as he picked up Ram's sleeping body from the ground.

"No, Garf," Rem said firmly.

Garfiel sighed and handed Ram over to her sister. Rem carried Ram back to the driver's platform leaving Garfiel to gently pick up Felt and follow her.

"This shit is all so fucking stupid," He grumbled.

Subaru groggily sat up on the couch, "Ugh. What happened?" He muttered. He saw Puck's green crystal sitting beside him.

"Subaru!" Emilia cried out, leaping to her feet.

Subaru rubbed his eyes. He saw Emilia wilting under the glares of Puck and Beatrice. Emilia bowed her head and slowly sat back down.

It was almost night time, "Um, hey guys. Did I miss anything?" Subaru asked.

Puck was still glowering at Emilia, "Well, you missed *dying*, Subaru, but just barely," Puck growled.

Subaru looked around in bewilderment. The trailer had become a magical garden full of plants made of ice. They were even growing straight out of the walls in complete defiance of gravity. "What the hell happened here? When did we plant a garden?"

The spirits glanced at each other, "Are you feeling alright, Subaru?" Beatrice asked.

"Um, a little confused, honestly," Subaru replied, "What happened? Is everyone OK?"

"You were in really bad shape, Subaru," Puck replied drifting down into Subaru's cupped hands as Beatrice hopped up onto the couch beside Subaru and rested her head against his chest. Subaru wrapped an arm around Beatrice to hold her close, "Although, I suppose Felt was honestly worse. Rem had some wounds but nothing all that serious. Ram and Garfield got off with scratches."

"Well, that's good. I mean not so good for *Felt* but still. So what exactly happened?" He asked.

The spirits glowered at Emilia.

Emilia bowed her head in shame.

Subaru coughed nervously, "OK, I'm sensing that everyone blames Emilia for this mess but, um, maybe you guys could explain it in a little bit more detail?"

"The witch cast a curse, in fact," Beatrice snarled at Emilia, "She froze the entire area and started spreading blood drinking frost flowers everywhere. The blossoms tried to eat Betty's Subaru and the others!"

Subaru gaped at Beatrice. He looked at Emilia who was sitting there crying, "Mili, how did you do that?"

"I don't know, Subaru," She whimpered, "I am so so sorry. I don't know what came over-"

"No, Emilia," Subaru interrupted, "*How* did you do that? I know it was an accident, you didn't need to clue me in about that. But how did you do it? You always needed to rely on Puck for most of your magic but now you suddenly managed do this? You've never had that kind of power before so what gives?"

Emilia frowned and thought it over, "I don't know. You're right, I've never been able to do anything on this scale, at least not since I got thawed out of the ice. I thought I had used up all my magic cursing the forest. I liked not having that much power anymore so I didn't investigate it."

"What do you mean 'thawed out of the ice?'" Puck growled.

"I'll explain later," Subaru mused, "Puck, I have a question for you: If Emilia had previously been contracted with a Great Spirit, could that have absorbed the bulk of Emilia's natural power or maybe the spirit could have suppressed it another way?"

Puck sounded exasperated, "Subaru, I'm telling you, I don't remember ever-"

"I know, Puck," Subaru sighed, "Just think of it as a hypothetical question."

"Well," Puck floated up in the air and folded his arms as he thought, "I mean, a contract with a Great Spirit does absorb a lot of mana. Most people couldn't form one at all."

"Wait, then how am I doing it? Much less doing it with both of you at the same time?" Subaru asked.

"Oh, you have a ton of magic, Subaru, although it's mostly inert. I guess that's because of your Authority. It's funny but I never really thought about how odd it was that you had so much magic before. You could probably make a contract with every Great Spirit in the world without even noticing the drain."

Beatrice pinched Subaru's side, "Do not take that as a suggestion, in fact!"

"Ouch! Don't worry, Beako. I'm not planning on expanding our family," Subaru replied. He hesitated, "By contract anyway," Subaru amended. "OK, so if Emilia was contracted to a Great Spirit previously, could that drain account for why her magic seems so much stronger now?"

Puck thought it over while glowering at Emilia, "Not really, Subaru. The gap between what you've described as her magic and what she actually possesses is just too big. The rest of it would have to have been magically sealed."

"Could a spirit do that?" Subaru asked.

"Sure, if she was willing to allow it but why would they?" Puck asked.

"Maybe the spirit was really overprotective and was worried that Emilia might hurt herself wielding magic he wasn't sure she could control?" Subaru suggested looking guiltily at Emilia.

Emilia sighed and bowed her head.

"Hm. That spirit had good judgment, I suppose," Beatrice said in a snippy voice.

"That's my Beako for you," Subaru sighed, "Takes no prisoners, suffers no fools." He shook his head, "Emilia, are you OK?"

"Is *Emilia* OK, in fact?!" Beatrice interjected, "This witch suffered not a scratch! It was the rest of us who suffered including Betty's Subaru! The witch should be made to depart immediately. Or be reduced to ashes..."

"That's enough, Beako," Subaru said trying to sound both patient and firm, "I know you don't remember her but the four of us really are one family and Emilia needs our help right now."

Puck and Beatrice shared a look that was equal parts concerned and exasperated.

"Subaru, I'm not sure you realize just how close you came to dying because of this girl," Puck grumbled.

"Believe me, Puck, it wasn't the first time," Subaru smiled.

"Subaru!" Emilia complained.

"How are you feeling, Emilia?" Subaru asked patiently.

Emilia stared at him in disbelief, "Subaru! I almost killed you! I almost killed Felt!"

"Yeah, I know, Mili, I was there," Subaru said calmly, "I appreciate you not actually killing me by the way. I do want to go and check on Felt though."

"Betty thinks that Subaru's admirable kindness and empathy might be going too far when it starts being applied to witches, in fact," Beatrice muttered.

"Well, first thing's first," Subaru said, "Emilia, do you have your magic under control right now?"

She bit her lip and nodded.

"OK, that's good," Subaru said feeling the trailer start to slow down and pull over to the side of the road, "How long was I asleep?"

Beatrice scratched her chin, "Almost twenty four hours, I suppose? Your mana was nearly drained."

"Felt barely has any mana so she got off easier in that regard. She woke up pretty quick once I healed her wounds. We're probably stopping for dinner now and the others are going to make some food," Puck added.

"OK, great," Subaru muttered standing up.

He immediately became light headed and crashed back down on the couch.

"Hey! Subaru!" Puck protested, "Take it easy! You lost half the blood in your body yesterday!"

"Well, you don't hear that everyday," Subaru muttered rubbing his forehead. "Just for comparison, does anyone know how much blood I lost when Elsa gutted me?"

"Subaru promised Bubby and Betty that they would be together forever," Beatrice grumbled, "Betty recognizes that Subaru is mortal but could he stop almost dying so often, I suppose?"

Subaru sighed and slowly got to his feet. He awkwardly waded through the delicate crystal flowers that seemed as strong as steel, "Alright, well I have a lot to catch up on so lets go out then," Subaru said extending his hand to the seated Emilia.

"No," Puck and Beatrice both said flatly.

"Huh?"

"That witch is staying where we can watch her," Beatrice asserted.

"If we all go out together, you can still watch her," Subaru argued.

"No, Subaru," Puck replied firmly, "It's not going to happen. That witch is dangerous and she is staying someplace where we can limit the damage that she causes."

"It's really fine, Subaru," Emilia said with a sad smile, "I'm alright here. You should go check on Felt."

Subaru sighed and nodded.

Beatrice tugged on Subaru's arm and he obligingly picked her up.

"It's Bubby's turn to watch the witch, in fact," Beatrice said as Subaru hoisted her up onto his shoulder.

Puck sighed, "Fine. Keep my crystal close to you though, Subaru. I don't know how she got it away from Felt but I don't want that *witch* to touch it ever again."

Subaru looked at Emilia, pained but she just shook her head sadly.

Subaru pocketed Puck's crystal with a sigh.

Subaru walked out of the trailer and found Rem, Garfiel, and Felt sitting in a nearby field trying to start a campfire. Felt had changed clothes and was now wearing a yellow dress that she must have brought to Arlem for the meeting with the nobility.

"How long until dinner?" He called casually.

"Subaru!" Felt cried out.

"Captain!" Garfiel shouted with a laugh.

Garfiel and Felt rushed over to Subaru. Rem gave him a steady look then turned away and continued fussing with the campfire.

"Subaru, are you alright?" Felt asked.

"Fine, Felt. How about you?" He asked in concern. Felt did not look good. Her thin body had large bruises all over it and her eyes had become sunken and haunted.

"Oh, I'm fine, boss," Felt snorted after a moment's hesitation, "I've been through way worse."

Garfiel barked a laugh, "The shrimp is pretty tough," He said cuffing her shoulder.

Felt bit her lip against crying out as she grabbed her shoulder.

"Seriously, Captain, it's good to see you back on your feet," Garfiel told him, "You were in bad shape. I was worried that... well, it's good to have you back," He laughed.

"Any problems while I was napping?" Subaru asked walking to where Rem was starting a fire with the others.

Garfiel shook his head, "Smooth sailing so far, Captain. No sign of the Archbishops since Ley ran off. We've been taking turns feeding the witch-"

"Garf," Subaru moaned.

He snorted, "Fine, we've been taking turns feeding 'Emilia.'" He said sarcastically.

Rem managed to strike a spark and quickly fed it with twigs and dry grass.

"Nice work, Rem!" Garfiel cheered, "It's cold out here tonight. Right, shrimp?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, fleabag. I'm not some fainting flower like you. Some of us are used to living rough," Felt snorted her arms wrapped around her thin body as she shivered.

"Rem, are you OK?" Subaru asked glancing over her bandaged wounds.

She gave him a dark look, "Fine. I'll go fetch some food for us to cook," She said walking off.

The three plus Beatrice sat around the the campfire, feeding it with sticks and helping it grow.

"How's Ram? Is she up yet?" Subaru asked.

Garfiel shook his head, "Nah. The magic cat took a look at her earlier. He said that her Gate or something had been damaged previously. The cat told me that the mana-drain thing that happened when the barrier broke hurt her more than the rest of us. He doesn't expect her to wake up before sometime tomorrow."

"Well, I'm glad she's recovering at least. So nothing major has happened since yesterday?" Subaru asked.

"No, but that's fine with me," Garfiel admitted, "Yesterday was wild! It was like Jack facing the storms."

Subaru laughed, "Garf, I think that's the first time I've ever heard you admit that something might be too much for you to handle!"

Garfiel scowled then relaxed with a smirk, "Hey, Captain, what can I say? You were persuasive," Garfiel snorted, "That little frog-faced freak was pretty persuasive too. I thought you said he was the weak one."

Subaru snickered, "He is."

Garfiel looked at Subaru incredulously.

"Roy and Ley are by far the weakest Archbishops I've met. I have no idea how we could even hope to wound Capella,

Petelguese could rip apart a small city with his bare hands, and don't even get me started on Regulus," Subaru sighed.

"Fuck. What the hell have I gotten myself into?" Garfiel whispered.

"Yeah, don't feel too bad, fleabag," Felt commiserated, "I've been asking myself the same question ever since I met the boss."

"Betty's Subaru does have a habit of getting us into strange situations, I suppose," Beatrice mused from Subaru's shoulder. "So far Betty's Subaru has led us into the thick of a fight for the throne, an ancient magical Sanctuary from which we barely escaped with our lives, and a protracted battle with the Archbishops of Sin. Where do you plan to lead us next, I suppose, assuming we survive the trouble you've already stirred up? Sailing off the edge of the world?"

Garfiel and Felt burst out laughing.

"Jeez, guys!" Subaru complained, starting to laugh along, "What is this, 'pick on me' day? I've had a pretty rough go of it myself lately."

"Hey, you're the boss, Subaru! You get to take the blame for all of this shit!" Felt chuckled.

"Betty agrees," Beatrice added primly.

"Hey, I'm not your boss, Beako. I'm your family, so you stay out of this," Subaru snickered at her.

"Betty feels entitled to tell her brother, both of them actually, when they are skipping merrily down the road toward disaster," Beatrice replied.

Garfiel was still laughing out loud while Felt sat there with a smirk on her face.

Subaru chuckled and shook his head ruefully, "Look guys, if anyone has a better idea, I am all ears! Seriously! If someone has a better plan, lay it on me, I'd really appreciate it."

Garfiel finally managed to contain his laughter, "Eh, relax, Captain. Me and the shrimp are only fooling around."

"I know," Subaru agreed.

It was quiet for a moment.

"You know, Garf, it's weird to say this but I feel like we get along a lot better now than I remember," Subaru mused.

Garfiel gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean, Captain?" He asked.

"Well, I remember us being pretty adversarial, until the fight with Roy at least," Subaru struggled to put his thoughts into words. "I guess in this... 'time-line,' or whatever you want to call it, we get along better."

Garfiel scratched at his wild yellow hair looking confused.

"So, how did we meet?" Subaru asked him.

"What?! We met two fucking days ago, Captain! You got any idea how weird that question sounds?" Garfiel replied.

"Imagine how weird it feels to be the guy asking it and knowing that his memories are different than everyone else's," Subaru chuckled.

Garfiel looked awkward but shrugged, "We met when you gave me a flying lesson."

"I beg your pardon?"

Garfiel laughed, "I'd been trying to pass those shitty trials for two weeks by then. I was getting pretty down on myself so the shrimp here kept kicking my ass to keep me moving forward."

"We had a *lot* of shouting matches. I had to scream pretty loud to get through your thick stone head," Felt commented with a faint smile.

"Yeah, Captain, so when you and the Little Bit came to the Sanctuary, Felt and I were at the Tomb screaming into each other's faces and promising to do all kinds of gruesome things to each other. I guess you thought I was really threatening the shrimp because the next thing I knew I'd gotten punched in the gut and I was airborne," He snickered.

Garfiel laughed at the stunned look on Subaru's face, "Yup, I got some great hang-time too! Then I ate dirt. By the time I had walked back to the tomb, the shrimp had explained the situation and you were seriously sorry. My magnificent self decided to forgive you but you had to promise to go a few rounds with me after we got out of the Sanctuary!" He yelled smashing his fists together.

Oh boy, that sounds painful!

"Maybe we should wait on that until we're not running for our lives, Garf" Subaru suggested.

"I hear that, Captain," Garfiel said picking his teeth.

Garfiel frowned, "Say, Captain, how do *you* remember us meeting?"

He's curious about the difference in our memories? That could be a good sign.

"It's a lot less exciting to be honest," Subaru shrugged, "I came into the Sanctuary and heard Emilia sobbing. She'd failed the trials again and Felt was trying to help her get through it. She actually blacked out from the stress so Felt and I took her back to the cottage to rest. We bumped into you and Ryuzu on the way back. You kept saying how... pathetic you thought Emilia was," Subaru growled, "And I really did come close to knocking you across the field. Instead you took off and left me and Felt to put Emilia to bed."

Garfiel scratched his head, "Look, Captain, I'm not saying that you're lying but even if my memories were switched around, that story still doesn't make much sense to me. Why would I make fun of someone because they couldn't complete the trials? I wasn't having much luck either."

Because you're an insecure child who covers up said insecurities with aggression and bravado? God, was I this annoying when I went through my edgy phase?

Yeah, something tells me I don't want to hear the answer to that question.

"Well, none of us knew that you *could* take the trials," Subaru replied, "Maybe Ryuzu knew but she didn't see fit to share it with the rest of us so Emilia was our only possibility and I never even met this Otto guy. Roy showed up at the tomb because someone had told him to capture Emilia and Emilia was at the tomb because she was trying to break the barrier. We killed him and then while we were fighting Capella, Emilia succeeded in breaking the barrier and we got the hell out of there."

Garfiel looked pensive and folded his arms across his chest.

"Subaru," Felt grumbled, "*None* of that happened! It's all illusions. It's not real."

Subaru shook his head, *There's no point in arguing about it. It will just lead us in circles.*

"Well," Subaru sighed, "You have your memories and I have mine, Felt."

"Yeah," Felt grumbled, "But the funny thing is that my memories have the benefit of agreeing with Garf and Rem and Beatrice. The only person who agrees with *you* is that witch. Think about that."

Subaru took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He changed the subject: "So, Garf, once we get somewhere safe, are you planning to go meet up with Ryuzu or are we going to get to keep you around for a bit?" Subaru asked.

Garfiel looked up at the stars thoughtfully, "I dunno, Captain. I definitely need to go and make sure that she and the others are OK," He mused. "If they have landed somewhere safe then I'm a free agent and I think I can do a lot more to *keep* them safe by taking the fight to the Cult rather than waiting for the Cult to come to us."

"Sound thinking," Subaru replied, "I just hope you're not planning to take on the freaks as a one man army."

"Nah, Captain. I think maybe I've gotten a little bit smarter in the past few days," Garfiel admitted.

"Could have fooled me, fleabag" Felt commented poking at the fire with a stick.

"Oh shut up, shrimp," Garfiel chuckled, "Besides, I seem to have already fallen in with the craziest group of fuckers since Martin and Roger took on the General. Pretty sure if I just hang with you lot, the Cult will come to me."

"Beako, I don't know what irritates me more," Subaru grumbled, "That Garf would say that, or the fact that he's probably right."

"Betty finds the latter far more objectionable, in fact," Beatrice replied and Garfiel laughed.

"Hey, I'm going to go see if Rem needs any help," Felt sighed and walked off into the field.

Subaru waited until Felt was out of earshot, "I think maybe I won't point out that Rem is in the opposite direction from where Felt is going."

"Yeah," Garfiel muttered, "Hey, Captain, listen: I'm worried about the shrimp."

"She doesn't look good," Subaru agreed.

"I don't think she slept at all last night," Garfiel told him, "And I'm not sure she's eaten today. Those freaking... flower things really got to her."

"Trust me, I can relate," Subaru admitted with a shudder, "I was grateful when I blacked out."

"Yeah," Garfiel said slowly, "Captain, Felt *didn't* black out. She remembers all of it."

"Oh," Subaru flinched. "That's... that's really not good."

Garfiel shook his head, "Yeah. I thought maybe you could talk to her about it. I really want to help the shrimp out after everything she did for me during the trials but I wasn't really sure what to say to her. I was worried that I'd just end up saying something dumb."

"Probably but that's part of what we like about you," Subaru shrugged.

"Hey, Captain! Give me a fucking break!" Garfiel laughed.

Subaru gently deposited Beatrice on the ground, "Can you go check in on Puck for a bit? I need to talk to Felt and she'd probably prefer not to have an audience."

Beatrice pouted, "Subaru had better make lots of special time for Betty when we get home!"

Subaru wrapped her in a tight hug, "It's a date," He promised.

Beatrice smiled and walked away with her head held high.

Subaru walked over to Felt. Felt reclined under a small tree with her arms wrapped around her knees and her haunted eyes staring off into the distance.

"How are you doing, Felt?" Subaru asked sitting down beside her.

"Fine," She said shortly not looking at him.

Subaru looked at her with concern and gently slipped an arm around her tiny shoulders.

Felt stiffed, "Hey, boss! You don't pay me enough for that! I don't let my clients touch me! I don't!"

Subaru wrapped his other arm around Felt and drew her close.

Felt's large red eyes filled with tears and she buried her face in his chest with a sob.

Subaru rubbed her back, "It's alright, Felt. It's alright. It's all over."

Felt was weeping so hard that her entire body trembled, "No, it isn't!" She sobbed.

"What do you mean?" He asked gently.

"I can't handle what the witch did to me, Subaru! I thought I was tough and that I could handle anything but I just... I just can't fucking cope with it!"

"It's OK, Felt!" Subaru said uncertain if it really was, "It's OK! It's just a memory! It can't hurt you!"

"Subaru, I can't sleep! I can't close my eyes! Every time I try to lay down, I feel the frost flowers burrowing into me! I feel them slicing my skin and cracking my bones open to drink my blood!" Felt wailed.

Subaru's eyes widened in horror as he held Felt tighter.

"It's alright, Felt! I'm here now! We're... we're going to figure this out!" Subaru said helplessly as Felt sobbed into his shoulder.

"Subaru," She sobbed, "They were eating me alive... They spread all over my body and they were sucking me dry..."

Subaru gently rocked her, "It's going to be OK, Felt. Maybe not today but it's *going* to be OK. We have two Great Spirits on call and once we get back to the capitol we'll find the best healer around. We'll figure out how to help you get through this!"

Felt sobbed.

"Maybe you can't sleep tonight," Subaru soothed, "I'll stay up with you and we'll talk. If you think you *can* try to sleep, I'll hold your hand until you fall asleep. I'll hold your hand all night if you need me to."

Felt was panting for breath as she lay against his chest, "Subaru," She whispered, "What are we going to do about the witch?"

Subaru hesitated for a long moment, "*Emilia*," He emphasized gently, "Feels horrible about what happened. She never meant to cast those flowers on us, she was trying to stop Ley. And I know how horrible those flowers were, believe me," Subaru lied knowing their experiences where in no way comparable, "But our problem right now isn't Emilia, it's helping you to recover."

Felt looked at Subaru incredulously then shook free from his embrace. Felt leapt up and stormed away with her arms folded tightly across her chest.

"Felt, wait!" He cried hurrying after her.

Felt stopped but didn't turn around to face him. Her arms were holding herself together with raw determination, as if Felt was worried that she was about to fall apart. Subaru had never really noticed how tiny Felt was before, how terribly frail and breakable she seemed.

Felt took a deep breath, "Subaru, I need you to get your goddamn head on straight."

"Felt?" He asked.

"That witch is *not* your friend, Subaru!" Felt cried out whirling to face him with tears in her eyes, "You've never even met her before! We're all telling you the same thing but you won't listen to us! Do you really trust *her* more than your

closest friends?! Think!"

"Felt," He whispered uncertain of what to say.

Felt turned her face away with a grimace, "That... *witch* almost killed you, Subaru," Felt's face contorted in agony, "She almost killed me! Do you not even care?!"

"Felt, of course, I care!" Subaru protested wondering what he could say.

"What kind of magic changes everyone's memories except for one person? What kind of sense does that make?" Felt demanded.

"I have an Authority and that protected me," Subaru explained.

"Why would anyone even do this?! Give me *one* reason why anyone would want to make the entire world forget that some girl existed? What possible purpose could that serve?" Felt shouted.

"I don't know yet," Subaru admitted.

"No shit, Subaru, because there *isn't* one! This theory of yours doesn't make sense because it benefits nobody! But if the witch is weak and vulnerable and needs a protector, then it makes perfect sense to bewitch the strongest person around and make the bonehead think he's in love with her!"

"Felt, that is not what happened!" Subaru shouted.

"The witch is twisting your mind, Subaru! You need to trust your friends and get the hell away from her! She *will* turn you against us if you let her! Please! Don't you trust me at all?" Felt begged.

"Of course, I do!" Subaru assured her, "You are my precious friend, Felt. I promised that I would take care of you."

"Well, no offense, boss but so far you've done a pretty shit job!" Felt snapped back.

Subaru flinched looking stricken.

"I'm not stupid, Subaru," She moaned looking away with a haggard expression on her face, "I'm not Reinhard! I knew exactly how much trouble I was risking when I lied to Heinkel and the council for you. But I did it because I thought we were friends.

"I hate the fucking nobility! You have no idea the way they have treated my friends. How they'd treated me personally! I'd like to gut each and every one of them but at the selection I put on a pretty dress and smiled at them because you were my friend.

"But this time... Subaru, she tried to kill me!" Felt wailed burying her face in her hands, "She tried to torture me to death with those horrible parasitic flowers!"

"Felt," Subaru whispered taking the little girl in his arms.

"I don't understand what's going on, Subaru, and I don't care! I don't know what the Authority means or why it matters that the dragon blood is all used up!" She cried out burying her face in his chest. She trembled in Subaru's arms and panted for breath until she could continue, "Subaru, if we just go back to the capitol then when the selection ends you *will* be King! You could make things better for millions of people across the continent!"

"If you think that there's no point to taking the throne anymore, fine! Let's just grab Garf and the spirits and get the fuck out of here! We'll find Red and we'll disappear! We can make a go of it together! Let the world worry about its own problems. Let's forget about thrones and Archbishops and everything else! I'm fine either way but please Subaru! Let's just get out of here before it's too late!" Felt sobbed into his chest.

"Felt," Subaru whispered trying desperately to soothe the girl's anguish, "There's more going on here. Emilia's memory has been erased from the whole world."

"No, it hasn't, Subaru!" Felt screamed in his face, "It's a lie! It's all a lie! We've all told you! I have been with you since the day you entered this world and Puck has been with you even longer! We both told you that 'Emilia' doesn't exist! The witch is twisting your mind! Your friends are trying to save you! Why won't you believe us?!"

Subaru sighed, "Felt, it's not true. Emilia is not twisting my mind. I'm certain of it."

Felt stopped crying and she wordlessly withdrew from Subaru's arms and took a few steps back.

Tears were still streaming down her face but her expression was hard, "Please don't tell me that, Subaru."

"Why not?"

"Because if that witch really hasn't put a spell on you then that means that you are willingly traveling with a witch who almost killed all of your friends. You're willingly traveling with someone who almost killed me and you don't even seem to care," Felt said flatly, "And I *really* don't want to believe that."

Felt turned and walked away without a word.

Subaru thought about chasing her and trying to talk to her further but he thought this probably wasn't the right time.

He glanced back at the fire where Rem had handed Garfiel some strips of meat and he was grilling them. Rem returned to the trailer and Subaru decided to follow her.

Subaru returned to the driver's platform where Rem sat next to her comatose sister.

"Any sign of Ram waking up?" Subaru asked climbing onto the platform.

Rem shook her head, staring at her sister, "Tomorrow night at the earliest according to Puck."

"I find that Puck is usually reliable," Subaru mused sitting down near Rem.

"A pity that can't be said about other people," Rem said not looking at Subaru.

Subaru sighed, "Well, I did promise to answer your questions once we were no longer running for our lives. Anything in particular you wanted to ask?"

Rem turned to face him, "Who are you, Subaru Natsuki?"

Subaru sighed, "I am Subaru Natsuki from another world, or beyond the Great Waterfall if you prefer. I came to this world almost two months ago through means unknown to me. I met Emilia that day, fell in love with her, and have spent the last month trying to become King so I can get the dragon blood for her. You and I have had a fairly rocky relationship together: you started off trying to kill me, then started to trust me, then stopped trusting me, so... where are we at the moment?"

Rem's face was hard, "Tell me about the witchcraft."

Subaru took a deep breath, "During my conversation with Roswaal the other day, he explained to me that the magic I acquired when I first came here was a type of witchcraft. It's called an Authority."

"And that makes you a witch," Rem said coldly.

Subaru sighed, "Yeah, I suppose it does. You know, for the record, I didn't go *looking* for this power, Rem. According to Roswaal it was looking for me, although don't ask me how that makes sense."

"And what about the other witch?" Rem demanded.

"Emilia is *not* a witch, Rem," Subaru said firmly, "People's memories have just been mixed up. Emilia doesn't have an Authority so she can't be a witch or an archbishop."

"And how do you know that she doesn't possess one?"

Subaru blinked, "Um, well, Roswaal probably would have mentioned it, wouldn't he?" Subaru asked awkwardly.

"Subaru, do you have any evidence at all that this girl does not possess an Authority?" Rem asked.

"Well, not exactly-"

"And do you any evidence at all that our memories have been twisted rather than your own? What kind of magic changes everyone in the world to remember something differently except for one person?"

"Well, maybe my Authority protected me," Subaru replied.

"Do you have any evidence of *that*?" Rem demanded.

Subaru just gave her a worried frown.

Rem turned her back on him and fussed over her sister, "Subaru, you once told me that you need to be certain that the person you're killing deserves to die."

"I remember," Subaru replied.

"That witch nearly killed you and all of your friends. If that doesn't convince you that she deserves to die then what will?"

"Emilia didn't mean to do that! Ley was kicking our asses and she tried to help! The magic just got out of control!" Subaru protested.

"Don't brush aside what she did as if being an accident rendered it meaningless!" Rem demanded, "Most of us aren't like you, Subaru Natsuki! We can't shrug off a mace to the head or a witch's curse and keep going! You once told me that mistakes are as serious as the consequences they caused. That witch's 'mistake' very nearly killed Felt and she is deeply traumatized as a result. Even if I believed for one single instant that the witch didn't mean to hurt us, she still caused grievous harm that can't simply be swept under the rug. But you, Subaru Natsuki, appear to be completely unwilling to hold the witch accountable for nearly killing one of your friends, especially Miss Felt who has shown you great loyalty and devotion."

Rem stood and looked down at Subaru coldly, "You are either deeply under that witch's spell or in a state of delusion. I can't tell which. Nor am I sure which answer I would prefer. You are ignoring the obvious answer in favor of the reality you desire and you are putting everyone who cares about you in jeopardy because of your foolishness."

"Rem-" Subaru began but Rem turned her back to him and sat down by her sister.

Subaru sighed and got off the driver's platform.

"Hey guys," Subaru sighed walking back into the trailer.

Emilia sat on the same couch as before with a sad expression. Beatrice sat across from her with Puck lying in her lap, both glowering at Emilia.

"So, nice to see that everyone is getting along so well," Subaru murmured as he sat down next to Emilia and took her hand.

Puck and Beatrice both grumbled.

Subaru smiled when a moment later Beatrice left her couch and sat on Subaru's lap possessively. Puck drifted back into her hands. They both still scowled at Emilia.

"Mili," Subaru chuckled, "Do you remember when we were first living together and Puck tried to use Beatrice to separate us while we were sitting on the couch?"

Emilia frowned and then her face brightened into a smile, "I do! I didn't understand *what* Puck was doing at the time but looking back on it, it was really funny. How did you get her to run away again?"

The spirits looked back and forth between Subaru and Emilia with baffled expressions on their faces.

Subaru laughed, "Remember, this was back when Beako didn't like me too much! I wrapped my arms around her and told you to do the same," Subaru said once again wrapping his arms around the little spirit, "Beako freaked out and yelled 'Betty is not for hugging!' and then raced out of the room at top speed carrying Puck with her. Luckily, we've gotten over that little issue, haven't we Beako?" Subaru said hugging and snuggling his spirit partner.

Emilia laughed out loud.

"Betty doesn't know what either of you are talking about, in fact! No such event ever happened. Moreover, Betty is entirely for hugging but only to certain persons. Too many people wish to hug Betty without permission. Although, it is understandable. Betty's form was chosen to be delightful, I suppose," Beatrice said loftily.

"Everything about Betty is delightful!" Subaru said cuddling the little girl.

"It's good that you recognize this, I suppose," She smiled.

"Hey, Subaru, how about a little affection over here?" Puck protested from Beatrice's arms.

"You got it, buddy," Subaru replied stroking the cat who smiled blissfully, "I'll give you both all the affection you want!"

Subaru looked at Emilia who watched their fractured family with a sad smile and watery eyes.

Subaru knew his own smile must be equally pained.

This is wrong. This is so wrong. She's a foot away but she might as well have been separated from Beako and Puck by a thousand miles. Our family has been divided by whatever this is. Emilia is being excluded and, what's worse, the spirits clearly consider her an enemy. I need to fix this before it gets totally out of hand, but how? Maybe I should have tried to capture Ley earlier so I'd have someone to question about it.

When I find out who did this, somebody is going to pay.

"Puck," Subaru murmured, "So is anything else coming back about Emilia?"

Puck stopped smiling and looked somewhat annoyed, "She seems familiar," Puck admitted grudgingly, "But I can't place her. I'm starting to wonder if I might be remembering her from a time before my memories were sealed. I knew a lot of witches when I was young."

Subaru blinked, "Wait what? When were your memories sealed? When did you know witches?"

"Oh, sorry, Subaru," Puck said with a yawn, "Did I forget to tell you about that? Betty and I are four hundred years old, after all. We date back to the time when the witches walked the land. Although our memories are a little fuzzy about those days."

"How did your memories get sealed?" Subaru asked.

"Um. I forget..." Puck replied.

"Please tell me that was a terrible joke," Subaru sighed.

"No. Sorry, Subaru. I did... well, something that I wasn't supposed to do, I guess, and as a result my memories of the past were sealed. Hey, Betty, do you remember anything about those days?"

"Betty only remembers her mother and her Bubby, I suppose," Beatrice replied, "Nothing else was worth remembering."

"Not helpful," Subaru sighed. He squinted at the ceiling thoughtfully, "What is a witch anyway? What makes someone a witch?"

"A witch is just someone who possesses an Authority," Puck explained.

"Hypothetically," Subaru began, "Is there anyway to check to see if Emilia has one?"

Beatrice shook her head, "There is no test for Authorities, I suppose."

"So there's no way to confirm that Emilia doesn't have one because that's just how our luck works," Subaru said leaning back with a sigh.

Subaru closed his eyes and shook his head, "Alright, they're cooking outside. Why don't I go see if I can get us a few plates of whatever Rem and Garf threw together."

"Betty has misgivings about eating any food that was prepared by Garf," Beatrice said as she slid off Subaru's lap.

Subaru grinned at her, "Luckily Beako, you are a Spirit and therefore you do not get hungry!"

Subaru hopped out of the trailer with a laugh.

Subaru approached the campfire. Rem, Felt, and Garfiel were huddled around it eating strips of meat and some roasted vegetables.

"We got anything for the prisoner?" Subaru asked mockingly.

Nobody laughed.

Subaru sighed, "Listen, guys-" Subaru began.

A hoarse screech bellowed out in the distance.

Everyone leapt to their feet.

"Garf, put out the fire! Now!" Subaru ordered.

Garfiel began to dump fistfuls of dirt onto the blaze.

"Subaru, what was that?" Rem demanded.

"I'm not sure but it sounded a lot like Capella's dragon form," Subaru whispered.

"How do they keep finding us?!" Felt whispered.

"Good question!" Subaru replied, "Alright. First, we put the fire out. The trailer is pretty well hidden under those trees. In the dark, Capella is going to have to get damn lucky to find us. Let's get back under those trees ourselves."

Garf had put out and disguised the remains of their fire through a combination of dirt piling and stomping on it.

The trio picked up all their food and tools and raced back to the trailer, huddling next to it.

A few moments later they heard the sound of heavy wings beating through the air.

Capella's dragon form, darker than the night sky, flew into view overhead. She passed over their field, gave a shrill bellow and continued to fly through the area.

"Is she leaving?!" Felt hissed.

Subaru shook his head, "No, she's hunting. She thinks we're here."

"Captain! We keep getting off the road! After we lost Ley, we blazed a trail through a dry prairie for two hours! How the hell do they keep finding us? This is like Kimble and Gerard at the dam!" Garfiel whispered.

Subaru frowned, "I think... maybe they're tracking us."

"The witch!" Rem hissed, "She must be signaling to them!"

"You might be right, Rem but not for the reasons you're thinking," Subaru muttered. "Come on, we need to move quickly."

Subaru jumped back on board the trailer.

"Hey, what's going on?" Puck called.

"Rem," Subaru said ignoring Puck, "I need a bag filled with food. Just throw enough in there for a few days, whatever you can grab."

Rem frowned but went off as she was instructed.

"Emilia, get out here!" Subaru ordered.

"No, Subaru," Puck said flatly, "We are-

"Yes, Puck!" Subaru snapped, "*This* is what we are doing!"

Emilia looked at Puck uncertainly. The flying cat folded his arms and nodded curtly, not looking at Emilia.

Emilia walked over to Subaru's side.

"Captain, what's the plan?" Garfiel muttered looking out at the sky, "She's coming back!"

Subaru sighed, "Alright. It seems pretty clear that Capella is tracking us. The only candidates for who she's tracking are me and Emilia so," He looked Emilia in the eyes, "The two of us are going to run away and hopefully draw the Cult away from all of you."

Emilia held his gaze and nodded once, her face set.

I can't stop the Archbishops from coming after us. If they really can track us then this is very likely to be our final stand. But at least we won't risk anyone else dying in the process. And if it is the end, at least Emilia and I will be together.

"What?!" Garfiel demanded.

"That's insane!" Felt whispered.

"If anybody has a better idea, I am all ears!" Subaru assured them, "Now listen, if this works, Capella and any other nearby Cultists should follow us and leave you guys alone. Wait until you have an opportunity to slip away and then get the hell out of here. You don't want them to spot you and get any bright ideas about taking hostages!"

"Then what?" Garfiel demanded.

"Same plan as before, get out of here, get somewhere safe, find Reinhard!" Subaru told him.

Rem returned and handed Subaru a small backpack he presumed was full of food. He quickly put it on his back.

"Subaru," Rem said quietly, "What if they find us before they realize that you've gone?"

Subaru gave a grim laugh, "That won't be a problem, Rem. I'll make sure I get Capella's attention!"

"Subaru," Felt hissed at him, "Just send the witch away! It's her that they want!"

"No, Felt," Subaru replied, "They want all of us. They are *pissed*. However, the question isn't which one of us they want, it's which one are they tracking. And considering what Roswaal told us, it's just as likely to be me as to be Emilia."

Garfiel shook his head violently, "You're walking off into a huge fight, Captain! I'm going with you!" He grimaced then continued in a low growl, "And the witch, I guess."

"No," Subaru refused, "I need someone I can trust here to make sure that Felt and Ram are OK. If we're lucky all the Archbishops will follow us but there are still plenty of Cultists that could come after you. You and the spirits need to stay here."

"What?! No way, Subaru!" Puck growled.

"Betty will not remain here!" Beatrice agreed.

Subaru took a deep breath, "Not this time, Beako. It's a hundred to one that I even get out of this alive. I don't want you to have to die with me."

Beatrice raised her chin defiantly while her eyes filled with tears, "Then Subaru is a hypocrite, I suppose! Betty asked Subaru to save himself in the Sanctuary but Subaru refused to let Betty die alone! He said he wanted to share Betty's death with her! Then why can't Betty share Subaru's death, in fact?"

"You might as well face it, Subaru," Puck said firmly folding his arms, "Either you let us come or we'll just follow you."

Subaru stared at both of the spirits especially the little girl whose face was wet with tears.

Impulsively he pulled them both into a tight hug, "I don't know what I ever did to deserve you in my life!" Subaru gasped.

Yes, you do. You acquired an Authority that forces people to like you. At that point, what you deserve and what you've earned immediately became irrelevant...

Subaru heard heavy wings passing overhead, slower this time.

"Alright," Subaru whispered, "When Capella gets a little further away, we'll slip out."

"Where are you going to go, Captain?" Garfiel asked.

Subaru pointed across the road, "Into that forest for starters. A dragon will have a hard time locating us in all that. Then we'll swing back toward Miseri. Maybe we can find some help there," He took a deep breath, "Listen. I'm truly

sorry that I got you all into this situation," Subaru sighed, "I'll do whatever I can to make sure everyone gets away safely."

Garfiel scowled and ground his fist into his palm.

Felt looked conflicted and Rem glared at Subaru coldly.

Subaru lifted Beatrice up on his shoulder.

"Alright, let's go now!" He whispered as the four of them leapt out of the trailer and started running for the nearby road before the dragon returned.

***Chapter 12*: Chapter 12**

Subaru, Emilia, and the spirits raced across the open field toward the road. They took shelter in a small grove of trees nearby.

Subaru scowled looking at four purple robed Witch Cultists walking up the road.

"What are we going to do, Subaru?" Puck whispered from his shoulder, "Should we wait for them to pass and then sneak by them?"

Subaru shook his head, "Nope. We promised Rem that we'd get Capella's attention. I think this should do it!" He said with a wolf grin, "We kill them and then run into the woods. I think Capella will take the bait."

"Four of them?" Puck asked negligently, "Gee, Subaru, I thought you said that this was going to be difficult."

Subaru laughed as he slipped Beatrice off his shoulder.

He glanced back at Emilia. Her face was pale and drawn but her eyes were steady. She gave him a nod.

"Keep your filthy magic to yourself, witch!" Puck snapped at her, "We'll take care of this, you just try to keep out of the way!"

Emilia flinched looking miserable.

Subaru wanted to say something but there was no time.

"OK, here we go!" Subaru said rushing out of cover with a roar.

The Cultists were startled by the man rushing toward them and Beatrice and Puck had already unleashed their magic.

Puck drove a great frost spike clear through one Cultist's body pinning him to the ground where he died with a gurgle.

Beatrice surrounded another Cultist with a purple aura that made his body melt into a puddle.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable*, trying to draw the Cultists' attention. He punched one in the face and his entire head exploded in a great fountain of blood.

The body fell onto Subaru splattering him with blood. Subaru barely swallowed a scream as he hurriedly pushed the bloody corpse off of him.

The last cultist turned to run away.

Puck started after him but Subaru grabbed the tiny cat, "No, let him go!" Subaru whispered.

Puck looked at Subaru in surprise.

Subaru gestured for Emilia to come quickly and the girl raced over to them as Subaru picked Beatrice up and put her on his shoulder.

"This way, hurry," Subaru shouted as they ran into the forest and disappeared under the trees.

"Subaru, why did we let that one go?" Puck asked in astonishment as he flew after Subaru.

"Because he saw where we went and he'll tell Capella! That way she'll look in the forest and not back where the others are!" Subaru said panting for breath as he ran deeper into the trees with his family.

"Subaru, how far can you run, in fact?" Beatrice asked in a worried voice.

"Not... far...", He admitted, "But I don't need... to run very far! We just need a little distance right now. Then we can walk."

Far behind them, Subaru heard a roar. For a terrifying moment he thought that Capella had found the others but he heard the beating of wings coming closer and he knew that she was following them.

Subaru saw a very dark dense part of the forest ahead, "OK, let's hold up... for a minute," Subaru said doubled over gasping.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, "Are you sure we're safe here?"

"Not... remotely," Subaru replied with a wry grin, "But Capella won't spot us under all this dense growth. That gives us a little window."

They heard the dragon fly overhead with heavy wing beats and keep going.

Subaru caught his breath and shook his head wearily, "Alright, enough standing around. Let's keep going." He said taking Emilia's hand as they continued into the dark trackless forest.

Crusch sat in the council chamber of her manor in the capitol, waiting for her guests to arrive. Felix stood silently behind her.

This is a rear guard action. If the reports I've heard are true, and frankly, I very much doubt that they are exaggerated, then the game is already over.

A few moments later, Jarvis the head butler entered, "Her grace, the Baroness Priscilla Barielle," He proclaimed as Priscilla marched into the room followed by her knight Al. Jarvis's tone was reserved and even but those who knew him well heard a slight growl in it.

Hm. It's not just anyone who can make Jarvis sound frustrated. I wonder what she said to him.

This promises to be moderately unpleasant. I was hoping that Anastasia would arrive first. At least Anastasia's company is tolerable and then after Priscilla showed up we could get down to business.

Now I need to make small talk with Priscilla.

"Good morning, Lady Priscilla. Thank you for coming to my humble home," Crusch said politely.

"I trust this is actually important," Priscilla sniffed. "My calendar is quite crowded at the moment and a great deal needed to be rescheduled in order to make time for this. What is this all about?"

"Perhaps we should wait for Lady Anastasia before getting down to business," Crusch commented.

Priscilla's eyes widened and then narrowed.

Priscilla may be flighty and frivolous but at least she's no fool. The fact that I've asked both of them here tells her that I have something important to say.

And if she's been listening to the news coming out of the the northwest she probably knows what it is.

Jarvis reentered the room, "Lady Anastasia Hoshen," He announced as Anastasia walked into the room followed by her knight Julius Juukulius.

I'm not very familiar with Julius although I know that he is close friends with Felix and Reinhard.

I should correct that oversight but it doesn't seem to be important right now.

Anastasia took a seat at the large conference table.

"Good morning, Lady Anastasia. Thank you for coming," Crusch said politely.

"Oh, my pleasure, Lady Crusch. Your letter made me very curious," She replied.

"Well, let's get down to business," Crusch began. "How much have you ladies heard about what's going on in north western Lagunica right now?"

"Quite a bit," Anastasia said calmly.

"Why? What's going on?" Priscilla asked.

Crusch managed to not roll her eyes, "There are currently unsubstantiated reports coming out of the Mathers domain. Apparently two different communities have been attacked and destroyed by the Witch Cult. A large number of refugees managed to escape and they alerted the Kingdom but the full facts are still being deciphered."

"That could be good news for us," Priscilla said carelessly. "If Subaru Natsuki can't keep people safe in his own domain then why would anyone want him on the throne?"

Crusch sighed, "The preliminary reports state that Subaru was directly involved in repelling the attacks. According to the intelligence compiled so far, the communities were devastated but Subaru Natsuki managed to avoid taking *any* casualties and got everyone out safely. The witnesses go on to claim that Subaru Natsuki fought three Sin Archbishops without assistance from the Sword Saint. They also claim that he killed two of them," Crusch said in a flat voice.

The words hung in the air.

"He killed Sin Archbishops?" Al asked forgetting his role.

"Silence!" Priscilla snapped.

"I've heard the same rumors, Lady Crusch, but as you say, they have yet to be confirmed. I also know that Reinhard van Astrea has set off to locate his lord. No one seems to know quite where Subaru Natsuki is right now," Anastasia commented.

"Maybe he died fighting the Sin Archbishops," Priscilla shrugged, "His luck was bound to run out sooner or later."

"That would indeed be the best outcome that we could hope for," Crusch admitted, "But we'd have to be very lucky for that to happen."

"Lady Crusch," Anastasia said, "I don't mean to be rude but what is all this about? I doubt that you invited us over here to discuss current events."

"In a funny way, I did," Crusch replied. "We are all in the same boat right now, ladies. Subaru Natsuki is the universally preferred candidate for the throne. If it turns out that he really did save these communities from the Witch Cult *and* slew two Archbishops, the game is over."

"Rather optimistic of you to assume that the game isn't over already, Lady Crusch," Anastasia commented.

"I don't know how optimistic I feel right now but I was hoping that the three of together might stage a recovery," Crusch replied.

"And how exactly would we do that?" Priscilla grumbled.

"I'm talking about a formal alliance between our three factions," Crusch explained. "We all work together, hand in glove, with the sole objective of bringing Subaru Natsuki back down to earth. We can break up the alliance and jockey for first place once the race evens out a little bit."

"I'm afraid that you're missing the point, Lady Crusch," Anastasia said gently, "That's a fine idea and all but what could we possibly do to blunt Subaru Natsuki's appeal at this junction; even if we were all working together? He killed the Whale *and* a pair of Archbishops? What's left? What could we possibly do to make the public think twice?"

Crusch was silent.

Anastasia raised an eyebrow, "Lady Crusch, forgive me, but you called a meeting and you didn't even have a plan to propose?"

Crusch flushed, "I was unable to come up with a strategy to recover from this on my own so I thought that if we all joined forces and combined our knowledge-

"I doubt that my trade network would tell you anything that your own military contacts haven't already passed along," Anastasia interrupted. "Believe me, ladies, I do hate to say this but unless someone has a really brilliant idea, it may be time for us all to bow to reality and start planning for our post election positions."

Crusch scowled at her, "Are you really willing to give up that easily, Lady Anastasia?"

"Easily? No. But I didn't become a master merchant by being unable to read the writing on the wall," Anastasia replied. "If we have a plan, then I'm all for it. Otherwise, it's time for me to start soliciting offers to give Subaru my support."

Crusch stared at Anastasia, "He already made you an offer, didn't he?"

"As a matter of fact he did," Anastasia admitted. "It was a *bit* too low but I think that it's negotiable."

"And what exactly did he offer you?" Priscilla asked sounding only vaguely curious.

"A position on the royal council and exclusive licensing and distribution rights to all of his inventions," Anastasia said without an ounce of shame. "Subaru Natsuki is about to completely rebuild the world economy and I want to have a good seat for the ride. As long as Subaru and I have the right understanding regarding my own interests, I can live with bowing to him."

Crusch fumed, *Subaru targeted her already! He knew that an alliance between me and Priscilla would never hold and would be almost worthless. So he picked out the moderate in our triumvirate and made her a ridiculously generous offer to ensure that she wouldn't get involved. Curse you, Subaru Natsuki! Will you deny me even the most unlikely of openings?!*

"Lady Anastasia, with all due respect, what makes you think that Subaru Natsuki will actually deliver on this promise?" Crusch growled struggling for control.

"Well, it's a verbal promise," Anastasia shrugged. "You can't take a King to court for violating a contract, after all. But Subaru recognizes that I can be useful to his regime and that makes me think he'll treat me fairly. I studied him carefully during our talks. He has amazing ideas but the details seem to defeat him. He needs a lieutenant who can get down into the trenches and make his ideas work. And I'm pretty sure that as long as his ideas *do* work, he doesn't really care if the Hoshin Trading Company is the exclusive contractor in facilitating them."

"Hm," Priscilla mused. "You may have a point there, Anastasia. I hate to admit it, but if there's really no way to catch up with Subaru then we should all make plans for our own advancement after his victory. I noticed that Subaru has yet to choose a queen. Put his brains and my luck together and in ten years Vollachia, Kararagi, and Gusteko will be vassal nations of the Lagunican Empire."

Crusch looked at Priscilla with open disgust, "Are you really prepared to go that far, Priscilla?" She asked not even pretending to be respectful, "Prostituting yourself to Subaru Natsuki?"

"I've occasionally wondered what my body and heart would be worth," Priscilla mused calmly, "I think the throne of the entire world sounds about right." She glanced at Anastasia, "I assume that we don't need to cross swords over this?"

"Thank you for your concern, Lady Priscilla," Anastasia giggled, "But I have another approach to gaining Subaru's attention. I'm shooting for 'Lord Chancellor.'"

Crusch buried her face in her hands.

"Oh," Anastasia continued, "And just as a courtesy, Lady Priscilla, might I point out that you are more right than you know about the 'Lagunican Empire.' My agents discovered that Subaru Natsuki is currently working on a new invention that will shake the very foundations of the world."

"What is it?" Priscilla demanded.

"Oh, I couldn't just give away high value intel like that for free, you understand. Placing agents to acquire this information was extremely costly. I think we'd first need to come to an understanding for our mutual interests," Anastasia replied.

Priscilla cocked her head, "Are you suggesting an alliance?" She asked sounding intrigued.

Crusch gaped at both women. *What is happening here?!*

"Exactly," Anastasia giggled, "We'll divide the power in the court between us. The queen and the chancellor. You'll have absolute political authority and I'll control the economic situation. With both of us working on Subaru, he should be easy enough to manipulate to our needs."

Priscilla frowned thoughtfully, drumming her long nails on the council table, "I'm surprised to hear myself say this, Lady Anastasia," Priscilla mused, "But that sounds rather appealing to me."

"Priscilla," Crusch interjected. "Are you out of your mind? Why would Subaru even *consider* marrying you? What could you possibly offer him?"

Priscilla laughed, "Oh, Crusch. You really need to get out of that uniform once in a while and have some fun. It would do wonders for your disposition."

Anastasia giggled.

"If he wants to bury his face in fat tits he can do so for a silver piece at the brothel of his choice," Crusch spat. "What could you possibly offer him that would entice him to make you queen? Your husbands have an interesting track record of dying rapidly."

"True, that is how my luck works. After all, none of my husbands have ever been able to give me anything that I couldn't acquire for myself, except for their rank and property. That meant the luckiest thing for me was to see them die off quickly. However, Subaru Natsuki can offer me the entire world on a platter *and* assure that I keep it; a deed that I doubt even I could do on my own. I'm confident that my luck will preserve Subaru in perfect health for many many decades." Priscilla smirked.

Crusch shook her head, "Have you forgotten that during the Whale Hunt Subaru gave you the job of 'party planner?' That was clearly because it was the only thing he thought you could do. You were an afterthought in the hunt and simply offered a sop to pacify you. I was the only one in the field. You both got played."

Priscilla and Anastasia looked at each other a moment and then they burst out laughing hysterically.

Crusch blinked and glanced at Felix who looked as puzzled as she.

"Oh my," Priscilla said wiping a tear from her eye, "She really hasn't figure it out yet."

"Do you think that we should tell her?" Anastasia giggled.

"Oh, let's. It sounds like fun," Priscilla answered, "Crusch, the only person who got played in the Whale Hunt was *you*," Priscilla said sweetly.

"I got to spread word of my contributions to the hunt across the entire continent," Anastasia explained. "The merchants and functionaries I court thought no less of me for not being involved in the field. They thought that I was focusing on doing the real work of spreading word and providing incontrovertible proof of the Whale's death rather than seeking my own glory. My faction grew over three hundred percent during Priscilla's Triumph party alone."

"As for me, I was badly wounded in the election when Subaru embarrassed me in public," Priscilla said her face momentarily darkening. Then she shrugged, "But I suppose I really can't blame him. He was certainly clever enough to realize that I was his most serious opponent. To form a new alliance, he offered me the perfect way to rebuild my faction: a citywide celebration. He gave me the perfect opportunity to prove to the entire kingdom that I would ensure their prosperity as only I could. I was in last place when the selection started. But after the Triumph I had drawn even with you, Crusch dear," She smirked.

"The only person who didn't benefit from the hunt and the Triumph was you yourself, Crusch," Anastasia explained with

a faintly patronizing look on her face, "Because you really *did* do nothing. You and your army simply stood there and watched the Sword Saint make the kill. You could hardly expect your supporters to be impressed. Even better, I have it on good authority that your officers now think extremely highly of Subaru Natsuki and are more than prepared to follow him in the future. You spent the entire hunt pacing around and scowling while Subaru charmed your entire officer core. Any hopes you might have had of mounting a coup have completely evaporated."

"The long and short of it, Crusch," Priscilla said loftily, "Is that the only person in this room with nothing to offer the future king, is you yourself and you have been neutralized accordingly," Priscilla glanced at Anastasia, "Lady Anastasia, I feel that we have wasted more than enough of our time here. The Barielle estate in the capitol is not far away. Might I offer you its hospitality? It would behoove us to further discuss our plans and goals in private."

"That sounds just lovely, Lady Priscilla," Anastasia said rising to her feet with a slight curtsy, "I accept with pleasure. I foresee a very long and healthy working relationship for the two of us."

The two princesses left, chatting animatedly without a backward glance at Crusch. Their knights followed them out leaving Felix alone with Crusch who could do nothing but stare straight ahead in shock.

Subaru and company kept walking for close to an hour. The dragon never got very far away from them and her frustrated bellows shook the canopies overhead.

"So from this, we can guess that Capella is either looking for us alone, or she's using Ley and a few more Cultists," Subaru observed.

"What makes you say that, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"Well, I suppose she *could* be using resources we haven't encountered yet but, at a bare minimum, we know that Regulus isn't here," Subaru replied.

"Um, why is that?" Puck asked.

"Because Regulus would have lost all patience with this game of 'hide and seek' by now and he'd simply tear up the whole forest until he found us," Subaru said with dark humor. Subaru paused thoughtfully, "Although on the other hand, if Ley or another weak Archbishop was around here, it might be worth our while to see if we could get our hands on him. I have a few questions I'd like to ask."

"Wait a second," Puck said incredulously, "Subaru, Ley is weak?! He was kicking all of us around like it was a game!"

Subaru shrugged, "Well, relatively yes. He's the weakest Archbishop we've encountered yet, except for Roy who was far weaker."

Puck looked unsettled.

"Anyway, what I was saying is that we know that whatever was done to Emilia must have involved the Authorities. So if we could catch one of the Archbishops maybe we could squeeze some answers out of him," Subaru finished.

"Betty doesn't like our chances of that, in fact," Beatrice commented, "We're one and four for successfully defeating Sin Archbishops."

"Well, that's a little pessimistic, Beako," Subaru objected, "We ran Ley off and Petelguese *is* dead, isn't he?"

"Perhaps Regulus will show up and kill more Archbishops for us, I suppose?" Beatrice asked sarcastically.

"No!" Subaru shook his head emphatically, "No more Regulus! Thank you!"

"Subaru, who is this 'Regulus' you keep talking about?" Emilia asked.

Subaru sighed, "The worst of the Archbishops," He replied.

"We hope," Beatrice corrected.

Subaru rubbed his forehead as they walked, "You're right, Beako. We're just guessing here. We have no idea how dangerous the Archbishops really are. There could be five Archbishops that are worse than Regulus but I can't imagine how."

"Hey Subaru, what makes this Regulus guy so dangerous anyway?" Puck asked.

"He can smash huge trees and boulders into dust without any effort and, as far as I could tell, he was completely invulnerable to attack," Subaru explained.

"What?!" Puck gasped.

"It's true, Bubby," Beatrice interjected, "Subaru punched him, buried him under an avalanche, and hit him with all the lightning contained inside the engine stone. He survived unharmed, in fact."

"Unharmed?" Subaru asked incredulously, "The jerk wasn't even dirty!"

Puck gaped at Subaru and Beatrice, "Wow. Subaru, how would we deal with someone like that?" Puck asked.

"At the moment my strategy relies heavily on running and hiding," Subaru admitted.

"Hey, Subaru? I think I'd like to raise a complaint about the overall quality of your plans lately," Puck grumbled.

"Sorry, buddy. I guess this whole situation caught me kind of flatfooted," Subaru sighed, "I only discovered that the Sin Archbishops existed a few days ago and now they're my greatest enemy."

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, "Do we have a plan for getting away from the Witch Cult?"

"Sort of," Subaru admitted. "Beatrice, can you smell the witch's miasma coming off Emilia?"

"Oh my, yes," She said pinching her nose theatrically.

"How much does she smell... well, compared to me?" Subaru asked.

"Um, maybe five times as bad?" Beatrice replied.

"And how much did she smell when you first woke up?" Subaru asked.

"Yuck. About fifty times as bad, I suppose!" Beatrice answered.

"Subaru," Emilia mumbled self-consciously, "Is there a point to this discussion?"

"OK, so here's my theory: I think that the Cult is tracking us by the smell or whatever you call it. I think that the miasma you picked up when you finished the trials was bad enough that the Archbishops can detect it from far away and that's what they're using it to track us," Subaru explained.

Emilia looked stricken, "Then the Archbishops are after me. I'm putting all of you in danger!"

Emilia tried to pull her hand free but Subaru held on firmly, "Knock it off, Mili! This is no time for you to play martyr!"

"But-"

"Emilia, Beatrice already told you the plan! Now, the Cult doesn't seem to be able to track me," Subaru continued.

"How do you know that, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"Because Ley looked surprised that I was in the trailer yesterday. If he could smell me, that wouldn't have happened. So Emilia's odor may be enough for the Cult to track us but I don't think mine is and Emilia's is diminishing over time. In twenty four hours it's gone from fifty times as bad to five times as bad. I don't know if that decrease holds steady but if it does, it should only be a few hours until Emilia only smells as bad as me and then doesn't smell at all. They'll lose the trail at that point and we can make a break for it. We'll make our way to Miseri and get help. The Cult doesn't seem like it's prepared to attack a major city yet so they probably won't follow us there," Subaru finished.

Beatrice looked thoughtful, "It make sense, I suppose."

"I really miss feeling like we're in control of things," Puck mourned.

"So in other words, you miss the days before you met me?" Subaru twitted.

Emilia chuckled wearily.

"Very funny, Subaru. I won't act like things haven't gotten really exciting since you showed up but I feel like the three of us had a handle on it until we went to the Sanctuary and fell into Roswaal's trap," Puck replied.

"That might have been the single worst decision of my life," Emilia mourned shaking her head.

Beatrice looked at her in confusion, "Wait. What did you have to do with that, I suppose?"

"You didn't know, Emilia," Subaru reassured her.

"I should have," She replied.

Subaru snorted, "How? How could you possibly have known that Roswaal was plotting against us. I had no clue. Are you really *that* much smarter than me?"

"No, I should have known better than to listen to him," She sighed, "He kept telling me what a burden I was to you and Puck. How pathetic I kept acting around you both. I should have never listened to him. Everything that's gone wrong happened because I believed him."

They walked in silence for a moment.

"You know," Subaru muttered, "I feel like the moral here isn't that you should have known Roswaal was plotting against you, it's that if you feel uncomfortable or insecure, talk to us about it! I mean, if you love someone then you need to trust that they'll be there for you and that they'll help you even if you really are being weak and pathetic at the moment," Subaru smiled, "You know, a very pretty lady taught me that in the garden one night."

"Who?!" Emilia demanded.

Subaru sighed, "You did, you dummy."

"Oh," Emilia said with a rueful flush.

Subaru laughed.

"Hey, just for the record, Subaru, Betty and I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about," Puck grumbled.

"Yeah, don't worry, Puck. Fixing that problem is currently number two on my to-do list."

They had been walking in the forest for several hours. Capella's roars and wing beats were getting steadily more distant. The woods were beginning to thin out revealing grasslands beyond.

"I wonder how long until sunrise," Subaru said with a yawn.

"Probably about six hours," Puck replied as he floated listlessly beside Subaru. His tail was hanging straight down.

"Betty, how bad does Emilia smell right now?" Subaru asked, his feet starting to stumble.

"Do you think we could come up with a nicer way to ask that question?" Emilia murmured tartly. She swayed on her feet looking exhausted.

Beatrice yawned, "About as bad as Subaru, I suppose. Maybe a little bit better."

"OK, great. That suggests that Capella really has lost the trail. That means we can start looking for a place to spend the night before we fall collapse," Subaru said.

"In the woods?" Emilia asked dubiously.

"I've seen a couple of huts and little cottages out through the trees. Probably hunter's lodgings during the winter. We can borrow one," Subaru replied.

"At this point, Subaru, I'm almost ready to lay down on some soft moss," Emilia confessed with a yawn.

They took shelter that night in a small one room hut just outside the forest. The hut sat at the edge of a wide grassy plain.

The hut was empty except for a single trunk and plenty of straw on the floor to bed down on.

The spirits and Emilia went right to sleep but Subaru stayed awake.

Emilia wasn't sleeping next to Subaru and this made him uncomfortable. The spirits had both snuggled up next to Subaru and glared at Emilia with fire in their eyes until she had gloomily accepted that there was a line in this hut that she must not cross. Their family was divided and Subaru felt an overwhelming wrongness with the situation.

Subaru told himself he was keeping watch but the reality was that sleep simply eluded him.

What happened? How did this situation get so far out of control? Four days ago I was with Beatrice calmly driving a wagon across the plains. My biggest concern was Emilia's self-esteem and her thoughts on our long term viability as a couple.

God, how has it really only been four days? Since then, it feels like the entire world has shifted under my feet! The Witch Cult is hunting me down, the dragon blood is all gone, and nobody remembers who Emilia is, which means they're all treating her like a witch!

What about Felt, Garf, and the twins? Are they even OK? I know that Capella didn't go after them since she was so busy chasing us but what if Ley showed up again. Or... God help them, Regulus?

Hell, maybe it didn't even have to be an Archbishop. If a hundred purple robed Cultists showed up, could Garf and Rem really handle that alone? Garf is strong but he's impetuous and inexperienced. Felt would be close to useless in that fight and Ram probably isn't even awake yet.

Did I do the right thing in running away? I mean, I thought so at the time but now...

I thought I was protecting Emilia from the Cult and our friends from being collateral damage but maybe I was only kidding myself. Maybe I was trying to rescue Emilia and just threw Felt and the others away as a distraction...

No. I can't think like that. I made the best decision I could. Maybe... maybe it was a bad one but I did the best I could with the hand I was dealt. I have to hope that everyone got away safely.

I hope Felt finds Reinhard quickly. She needs him and not just for protection. Maybe... he can help her heal in a way I couldn't...

God, imagine how furious Felt would be if she heard me say that.

What happens when we reach Miseri? They'll probably assume that Emilia is a witch as well. Maybe I could say she's my prisoner? Yeah that'll work: "She's my prisoner but I'd appreciate her staying with me and can you find a bed big enough for both of us? No reason, don't ask."

Do I have any idea how to make hair dye? If Emilia had brown hair or something that could save us from a lot of frustration.

Subaru dozed off.

Subaru woke up in the middle of the night, Beatrice and Puck still sleeping on top of his chest.

Emilia was gone.

Subaru was about to leap into full blown panic when he heard a soft sobbing nearby.

Subaru gently moved Beatrice and Puck without waking them. He then silently followed the sound out of the hut.

Subaru found Emilia huddled in a ball a short distance away.

She was crying and sobbing to herself, her face buried in her knees.

Subaru knelt down beside Emilia.

"It's OK," Subaru whispered.

Emilia's head flew up in surprise. Then she saw Subaru sitting beside her.

"Subaru," She whispered still crying.

Subaru wrapped his arms around her and drew her head to his shoulder.

Emilia whimpered and began to sob louder.

Subaru held her tight, "That's it, Mili. Just let it all out," He encouraged, "You've been through so much lately. It's OK to have a little breakdown. Take all the time you want and just... fall apart if you need to. When you're ready, I'll be here to help you put the pieces back together."

Emilia cried for a long time, burying her face in Subaru's shoulder. Subaru held her and waited. He stroked her back as her sobs wracked her body and she trembled in his arms.

Eventually she began to calm down.

Emilia's breathing evened out and they sat there in silence for a while.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Subaru whispered.

Emilia took a deep breath, "Subaru, I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"This week has been pure hell," Subaru agreed.

"I'm trying to be strong. I'm trying to be brave but..."

"You have been incredibly strong and brave in an impossible situation," Subaru assured her, "*Nobody* could have handled this any better than you."

"Subaru. This whole... It's like a nightmare!" She wept.

"I know," Subaru whispered holding her tight.

"Daddy is sleeping with you, Subaru! It's not fair!"

Subaru sighed, "No, it isn't. It's going to take time to fix this. But even if we can't fix his memories yet, Puck is warming up to you."

Emilia looked at Subaru through tear filled eyes. "No, he isn't, Subaru. Neither of them are," She whispered.

"Emilia-"

"Subaru, Daddy wants me dead! They don't believe *anything* that you've told them about me," She whimpered.

Subaru stiffened.

Emilia looked up at him sadly, "They don't believe a word of it. They're just humoring you. They're afraid that if they tell you the truth then you might try to leave them behind to protect me."

"I..." Subaru struggled to say anything.

Emilia shook her head with a whimper, "Beatrice and Puck *literally* want to kill me but Puck can read your heart and he knows that if anything happened to me you'd be completely destroyed." She shook her head, "So they're protecting me for you. But they resent it. They think that I'm putting you in danger. They think that I'm deceiving you. They think that I'm trying to steal you away from them. But they know that you think that you're... in love with me, even if it is just an enchantment. And Beatrice would do anything for you," Emilia took a ragged breath and her voice turned venomous, "*Daddy* would do anything for you! They think that they just need to put up with me until they can figure out how to

undo what's going on and prove to you that I'm an evil witch. Then they can....," Emilia ended with a whimper.

"We'll... Look, it's going to be OK, Mili," Subaru said desperately holding her tight.

Emilia sobbed, "I can't take seeing Daddy snarl at me whenever you're not looking. I hate how Beatrice keeps making threats to me and pretends that they're just jokes. I thought... It was always just me and Puck. And that was fine. I was happy that way. Then I met you and then you adopted Beatrice, I felt like I finally had a real family."

"You *do* have a real family," Subaru assured her, "I am right here with you and I am not going anywhere no matter what happens, no matter how bad things get. If you get too tired to keep going then I will carry you the rest of the way. That's what family means. I'm staying with you and I will never ever give up on you, Emilia."

Emilia was quiet for a long moment resting against his shoulder, "I love you, Subaru. I do. But... you can't take Puck's place."

Subaru kissed the top of Emilia's head. "I don't want to take Puck's place," Subaru said, "Believe me, that is *not* the relationship I want to have with you. But I am here to support you. I'm here to support you until we get Puck's memories back and I'll be here to support you *after* we get Puck's memories back."

Emilia sighed, "I thought that being trapped in the Sanctuary was an endless nightmare. You were gone. Even Puck was gone. But it was a thousand times better than having the people I care about hating me. I can't take the way Puck looks at me. He wants me dead."

Emilia shook her head looking absolutely crushed, "Maybe... maybe it's just time for me to leave. To go back to the forest."

"Alone?" Subaru asked incredulously, "Emilia, be honest. That isn't what you really want."

"No," She admitted, "But being alone is better than being surrounded by people who hate you. It's better than putting someone you care about in danger."

"But, Mili, what is your plan? Just go back to the forest and sit there until... what?"

Emilia shook her head, "Maybe someday you'll find a way to break this curse."

"Someday? Wouldn't you miss me?" He asked.

"More than you would believe," Emilia sighed, "But Subaru, please try to understand. Would you stay with me if you thought you were putting me in danger?"

Subaru opened his mouth to respond.

"Yes or no?" Emilia asked sharply.

Subaru gave her a dirty look, "Would you let *me* go off on my own because I was putting *you* in danger?"

Emilia blanched and then sighed, "We're quite the pair, you and I. Two people: both desperate to sacrifice themselves for the other."

"I think that maybe we both have some serious self-esteem issues," Subaru agreed.

Emilia stared off into the distance, "I hate myself for saying this but I really can't much more of Puck. Even if he won't actually attack me, his glares cut like knives. That's why I think... maybe I should just go. I'll go back to the forest and you can go reunite with Felt and Reinhard. They'll forgive you instantly. And you could even keep looking for a cure to the curse. It seems like this is the best idea. Just promise me that you'll take good care of Daddy for me..."

"Bullshit," Subaru snorted.

"Excuse me?" Emilia said in surprise.

"Emilia, be honest, this isn't you making a strategic decision for the best way to find the cure, this is you giving up. If you walk away, you're giving up on Puck, on me, and on us ever having a life together. Are you really willing to do that?"

Emilia took a deep breath, "Subaru, we don't even know what happened to me, much less how to fix it. What else can we do?"

"Emilia, if you want to give up on seeking out a cure then that's fine," Subaru said simply, "We don't have to try to fix this if you really don't think it's worth it or if you don't believe we can. We can just disappear but we are going to disappear *together*. If you're going to hide in the woods for the rest of your life then I'm going to be hiding right next to you."

Emilia shook her head against his shoulder and sighed, "Subaru, you dummy. Why would you do something stupid like that? You could be King. You could have a wonderful life. You deserve so much more than to hide out in the woods for the rest of your life with a suspected witch."

"I don't think life is about what we deserve, Mili. Life is about what we choose. I choose to be with Emilia, no matter what happens. No matter how bad things get, I want to be by Emilia's side. What about you, Mili? What do you choose?"

Emilia rubbed her eyes and sighed, "Subaru, even in a situation like this, you make everything sound so easy."

"Well, I *really* want to impress my fiancée," He admitted.

Emilia gave him a tired smile.

Subaru stood up and helped Emilia to her feet. "Come on, let's get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be another long day," He said leading her back toward the hut.

When Subaru and Emilia returned to the hut, they found Beatrice sitting outside calmly petting Puck.

Now that Subaru was watching for it, Puck's glowering at Emilia was impossible to miss.

"Oh. Where did you go off to, I suppose?" Beatrice asked in a languorous voice.

Subaru looked at Beatrice with mingled amusement and annoyance, "Did you two enjoy the show?" He asked archly.

Puck jumped and Beatrice flushed guiltily.

Subaru was about to continue when from behind him he heard a deafening thunderclap far off in the distance.

Subaru turned around and he heard another and then another.

Subaru peered across the grassy plain.

Far off in the distance he saw explosions. Balls of light and claps of thunder danced across the horizon.

"Subaru," Puck murmured flying over to perch on Subaru's shoulder, "What's going on?"

Subaru bit his lip, "Good question, buddy."

Subaru frowned, "Emilia, Beako, you guys stay here for a second. Puck and I are going to run up to the top of that hill and take a look at things."

"Right behind you, Subaru," Puck agreed.

Subaru snorted, "Actually, at the moment, buddy, you're riding on top of me but whatever."

"Betty. Watch the witch while I'm gone," Puck instructed.

Subaru made a face at Puck and then ran off toward the hill.

Emilia looked at Beatrice, "What did Subaru mean by 'the show?'" She asked, more to break the silence than out of any real curiosity.

Beatrice flushed and folded her arms across her chest, "Betty and Bubby were... watching you, I suppose," She muttered, "Betty and Bubby aren't very sneaky, I suppose. When Subaru came back and we weren't ripping the forest apart to find him, Subaru knew that we must have known where he was and what he was doing, in fact."

"Subaru is very clever," Emilia agreed before it suddenly dawned on her, "Wait! You were listening to us?!"

Beatrice looked at her awkwardly.

Emilia bit her lip, "Oh, Beatrice, I am so sorry!"

Beatrice just stared at her, "Why is the elf sorry, in fact?!"

"Beatrice I said terrible things about you and Puck-"

"The elf said the truth! Does the elf think she deserves abuse and is ashamed to speak of it?" Beatrice demanded.

"I'm sorry, Beatrice," Emilia murmured, "I was very cruel to you both. I was exhausted and angry and I exaggerated."

"The elf did not exaggerate. Bubby and Betty did threaten to kill the elf. She hurt our Subaru. Subaru means everything to Bubby and Betty. A witch who hurts Subaru should die," Beatrice said flatly.

Emilia bowed her head in shame.

"Hm. However, Betty never realized how strong Subaru's feelings for the elf were," Beatrice mused.

Emilia flushed.

"How does Emilia feel about Betty's Subaru?" Beatrice demanded.

Emilia looked at Beatrice guiltily, "Oh. You must be worried that I'm trying to take him away from you."

"Stop putting words in Betty's mouth, in fact! Betty is not afraid of you. Betty wants her Subaru to be happy above all else and Betty would welcome anyone who could make her Subaru happier, I suppose," She replied.

Emilia gave the little spirit a faint smile, "That's a very mature attitude, Beatrice," Emilia replied.

"Do you want to make Subaru happy?" She demanded.

"Of course I do," Emilia said in surprise.

"Betty has not seen evidence of this," She retorted.

Emilia sighed, "Beatrice, I... I know you don't remember me or have memories of Subaru and I being together-"

"Betty does not remember this. Betty isn't certain if this was true or if you are lying," Beatrice said matter-of-fact, "Betty also doesn't care. Does Emilia want Subaru to be happy?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Then why isn't Emilia trying to make Subaru happy, I suppose?" Beatrice demanded, "Since Betty met Emilia, Subaru has done nothing but think about Emilia. Emilia has also done nothing but think about Emilia."

Emilia flinched, "That's not fair, Beatrice!"

"That's truth!" Beatrice argued, "The elf is a spoiled child unworthy of being the precious one of Betty's Subaru!"

They were both silent for a moment.

"Betty could believe that her memories were changed, I suppose. Betty could... believe that her Subaru cared for the elf," Beatrice mused, "Betty's Subaru helps people. He supports them. He would have cared for and supported the elf."

"Subaru has taken care of me since we met. And all I've ever been is a burden to him," Emilia admitted in an ashamed voice.

Beatrice shook her head in disgust, "The elf is unworthy of Betty's Subaru. The elf is nothing but a spoiled child, in fact!" Beatrice said pointing at Emilia like a judge condemning a criminal.

"What are you saying?" Emilia whispered.

"The elf has refused to take any responsibility for this mess. The elf refuses to control her magic. The elf refuses to face difficult truths," Beatrice said sharply.

Emilia was crying freely, "Yes. I can't argue. That is all true."

"Does Emilia love Subaru?" Beatrice demanded.

Emilia hesitated then nodded.

"Emilia must commit to being more than she is in order to be worthy of Betty's Subaru, I suppose. Emilia's magic will put Betty's Subaru in danger. Emilia's magic will put Betty and Bubby in danger. Emilia must learn to control her magic. Emilia needs to grow up and take responsibility. Or admit that she will not and tell Subaru that she can not be Subaru's partner but just another of Subaru's burdens," Beatrice asserted.

"That's what I went to the Sanctuary to try to do," Emilia muttered, "I wanted to show him that I could be his partner. But even after I finally finished the trials everything went wrong..."

Beatrice looked out at the explosions far away, "Things will always go wrong, I suppose," Beatrice mused, "But if we have people who will stand beside us, we will manage."

Beatrice was silent for a moment, "The elf never answered Betty's Subaru: What does Emilia choose?"

"What?"

"Subaru asked Emilia what she chose. She did not answer. Subaru taught Betty that life was about our choices. Does Emilia know why Betty chose Subaru?"

Emilia looked uncomfortable, "Yes. You asked him to kill you."

Beatrice looked at Emilia sharply, "...You know about that, in fact?"

"You were lonely and miserable and you wanted to be put out of your suffering. And for some reason you asked Subaru to do it."

"Some reason?" Beatrice echoed, "Perhaps. Perhaps Betty's Subaru was just in the right place at a time when Betty would have taken anyone. Betty's connection with her Subaru grew very strong, very fast. Betty knows that there was something odd about it. Betty isn't sure why she chose Subaru that day. Betty also doesn't care."

Emilia stared at her, "You don't?!"

Beatrice shook her head, "Betty is four hundred years old. Betty has seen people join together for many reasons. Some of them were bad reasons. However, Betty knows that the reason why people come together is not as important as the reasons they choose to *stay* together. Betty doesn't know why she chose Subaru then. It doesn't matter. Betty just knows why she chose Subaru today.

"In the Sanctuary, Betty begged Subaru to run away and save his own life. Subaru refused. Subaru said he would rather die at Betty's side than live without Betty. Subaru chose Betty because he loves her and Betty will choose Subaru because she loves him. Betty will do that today, tomorrow, and after tomorrow. Betty chooses to be Subaru's Betty and for Subaru to be Betty's Subaru.

"Betty assumes that Subaru had a fairly silly reason to want to be with Emilia: he thought the elf was beautiful. Then perhaps he decided to help her because he thought her quest to save her kin was noble. Perhaps Emilia's quest is ended, perhaps not. But Subaru still chooses to protect Emilia because she matters to him. Subaru cares about Emilia."

Beatrice walked back into the hut, "What does Subaru mean to Emilia? What does Emilia choose to be to Subaru? And what does she choose Subaru to be to her?"

Subaru raced to the top of the tall hill with Puck on his shoulder. When he reached the summit, he crouched down and crawled on his belly to the edge.

Hm. The nice thing about having Puck on my shoulder is that unlike Beako, I don't have to worry too much about him falling.

Balls of fire were dancing on both sides of the field far away and thunderous explosions echoed across the plain.

"What the hell is that?" Subaru whispered.

"I've never seen anything like this before, Subaru," Puck admitted.

"Me neither. It looks like a war. If you told me that was artillery firing out there or carpet bombing, I'd believe you," Subaru replied.

"Artillery? Carpet bombing? What's that?" Puck asked.

Subaru hesitated then shook his head, "Not important right now," Subaru replied.

They watched the shocking display in silence.

"That's got to be a battle, right?" Puck asked, "Maybe armies of magic casters throwing themselves at each other?"

"Or just a few really really powerful ones," Subaru replied grimly.

"Do you think it's that Regulus guy you keep talking about?" Puck asked.

"Maybe. Honestly, I almost hope so. Little as I want to have anything to do with Regulus ever again, the notion that there are more people than just him in the world with that kind of power doesn't sit well with me," Subaru said.

"Who do you think he's fighting then? Reinhard?" Puck asked.

"Maybe. Or maybe it's some other champion that we're not aware of. Or maybe the Lagunican army? They might have mobilized more quickly than we thought if the Archbishops did enough damage to get the kingdom's attention on their way to the Sanctuary. Or hell, maybe Regulus and Capella had a falling out and we're watching two people who are pretty close to immortal try to kill each other. God help anyone who gets caught in that cross fire," Subaru muttered.

Subaru stared at the explosions in awe. He had never imagined destruction like this.

"Should we try to get closer and investigate?" Puck asked.

Subaru stared at the cat incredulously, "Seriously? You want to try to get closer to that?!" Subaru demanded as a particularly loud explosion shook the earth.

"Well, if it is Reinhard then he could probably protect us," Puck replied.

"Even if it is Reinhard, I'm not sure that *anybody* could keep other people safe in that mess," Subaru murmured looking at the dancing lights and explosions, "Secondly, there's no way to tell if it is Reinhard. It could be the Lagunican Army or even Capella. Even if we *did* know that one of the people fighting was friendly, which side of the field do you want to go toward? We have a fifty fifty shot at *best* of walking right up to someone who wants to kill us. Besides, Emilia would be in danger. You need to remember that we're currently traveling with someone whom everyone immediately assumes is a witch on sight."

"Yeah, Subaru, people are more perceptive than you'd think," Puck grumbled.

Subaru glowered at him and gently tapped the cat on the forehead with one finger.

"Ouch," Puck said unconvincingly.

"Even if it is Reinhard," Subaru continued, "We can't throw Emilia at him in the middle of a battle. He's going to be moving off instinct trying to contain the fight and if he has a split second to make a decision, he might make the wrong one. A battlefield is not the right place to try to convince him that Emilia isn't an evil witch."

"True enough, Subaru," Puck muttered, "And just for the record? That field of parasitic frost flowers she made when she almost killed you and Felt? That wouldn't be a great place to try to convince him either."

Subaru gave Puck a steady look, "Puck, do you have something you'd like to say?" He asked calmly.

"Why are we doing this, Subaru? I know you're a really nice guy but this is crazy! We rescued the witch from the Witch Cult. OK, fine. We did our good deed for the day. But the Cult can't track her anymore and staying close to her is doing nothing but putting all of us in danger. Let's send her on her way with our best wishes and get the hell out of here! It doesn't make sense to risk our lives this way," Puck glanced away, "Frankly, I'm starting to wonder if Felt might be right."

Subaru blinked, "Right about what?"

Puck hesitated, "While you were sleeping, Felt talked to Betty and me about a few concerns she had..." He trailed off.

"Such as?"

Puck sighed, "Subaru, how do you know that this woman isn't magically influencing you? Some Authorities can twist the minds of people around them without the victim ever realizing it. An Authority could compel someone to care about or even love its wielder for no good reason."

Subaru flinched remembering his talk with Roswaal about the Authority of Pride, "Believe me, Puck, I am well aware of that."

"Then how can you be sure she isn't doing exactly that? I know that you're always trying to be the hero but why would you risk your life, and *ours*, to help a woman you barely know? I mean, if Betty or I were being bewitched by an Authority to care for a person we had no reason to be invested in, we wouldn't know!"

"Please stop rubbing it in, Puck," Subaru sighed putting his face down on the grass and feeling sick to his stomach.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Subaru sighed.

Subaru and Puck returned to the hut. Emilia and Beatrice sat on opposite sides of the room. Both looked pensive.

"What's happening, Subaru?" Emilia asked quietly as they went back inside.

"War," Subaru spat. "Whose war and against what, I don't know, but the entire area is one big explosion. We're not going any further that way. Miseri is out of the picture for the time being."

"Then where are we going, in fact?" Beatrice mumbled.

Subaru rubbed his face still exhausted from the few hours sleep they had gotten, "It'll be sunup in a few hours. It'll be easier to pick our direction once we have the sun to guide us. Let's try to get a little more sleep and then we'll have some breakfast before we hit the road."

The spirits went back to sleep quickly but Emilia realized that Subaru was still awake.

"Subaru, are you alright?" Emilia asked quietly.

Subaru sighed, "I guess," He replied, "It's been a rough couple of days."

"Make that a rough couple of weeks," Emilia corrected.

"Yeah. I forgot that for you this nightmare has been going ever since you went to the Sanctuary," Subaru agreed.

"Yes, but it wasn't all a nightmare," Emilia replied, "Felt proved that she really cared about me. Before anyway," She sighed. Emilia shook off her malaise, "Subaru, I just realized that I still haven't thanked you."

"For what?"

"For helping me pass the trials."

"What? Why would you thank me? You only took those damn trials to save my ass from Roswaal," Subaru replied.

Emilia gave him a shy smile, "Well, I'd *like* to think that I did it to save a lot of people, even if maybe that isn't completely true," She admitted, "But you helped me get through them and I saw some things that... I really needed to see. You helped me to see myself in a new way and I don't think that I ever would have seen things this way without you, so thank you, Subaru."

Subaru scratched his chin, "You're arousing my curiosity, Mili. What did you see during the trials?"

She smiled at him, "I'll tell you. Someday."

"Uh-huh," Subaru snickered, "You know, I haven't really had a chance to talk to you about the dragon blood yet. It feels absolutely insane that somehow that's not our biggest problem right now."

"Yes," Emilia sighed, "That's the whole reason that Puck and I left the forest in the first place. And now it's all gone."

"I'm so sorry, Mili," Subaru said, "I can't even imagine how you must be feeling right now."

Emilia stared off into the distance for a moment, "It's devastating," She said, "But also strangely... liberating."

"What do you mean?"

Emilia sighed, "I owed it to my people to do whatever it took to free them. To dedicate my life to making up for that horrible mistake that made so many innocent people suffer. But if there's simply no way for me to do that..." She trailed off.

"Then you don't have to dedicate your life to doing something that's impossible," Subaru finished.

She nodded, "I feel a little bit relieved. And I feel guilty about that."

"Emilia, you did *everything* that was humanly possible to try and heal the forest," Subaru told her, "No one could argue different. You have nothing to feel ashamed of. I think accepting that you've done all you can, at least for the moment, is very mature and says a lot about how far you've come. Honestly, I was worried that the news of the loss of the dragon blood would completely shatter you and you'd become a shut-in recluse like I was," Subaru said in an apologetic voice.

Emilia smiled at him, "I would have guessed that too. Just a few days ago I think that would have certainly happened. But the trials changed me. Actually it wasn't really the trials it was the fact that I did them myself. I feel different. I feel stronger, more resilient," Emilia chuckled, "I truly never imagined that I would ever say this in a thousand years but... I like this new me. I think I could learn to like 'Emilia.'"

"Well, I think she's pretty special," Subaru commented.

Emilia laughed.

"It must be awful that all of our friends don't recognize you," Subaru said.

Emilia rolled onto her back staring up at the ceiling, "Yes, but mostly just Puck. It's so strange. I knew so few people in this world. Objectively, I'm probably the absolute best person that this curse could have happened to. The twins always treated me as nothing more than a house guest. Roswaal was conspiring against me. Garf is just frustrating. Felt and I became pretty close in the Sanctuary but that's just been over the past two weeks. Honestly, as long as you and Puck remembered me, I wouldn't even care about anyone else!"

"And you only got one of us. We were so close to this not even being a problem and we still missed," Subaru admitted.

"True, but as long as you remember me, Subaru, I can hold on," Emilia replied, "When I feel really bad about it, I wonder to myself what would have happened if you had forgotten me as well. I'd have probably died in the Sanctuary because you never would have come back to get me. Even if someone did find me, everyone would have assumed I was a witch and I would have been imprisoned or killed. You saved me once again."

"Well, you saved me from becoming Roswaal's puppet so I'd say that we're even," Subaru commented, "I don't like to think what that creepy man-clown might have made me do!"

Emilia chuckled, "Subaru, thank you."

"For what?"

"For never giving up on me, even if I wanted to give up on myself. For never going away no matter how hard I tried to push you. Thank you for... remembering me," Emilia said.

Subaru shook his head, "The world might forget you, but I never will."

Emilia gave him a warm smile, "You always know just what to say."

"I just talk a lot. Babble like I do and you're bound to get lucky sometimes," Subaru shrugged.

Emilia laughed.

They were both quiet for a moment, lost in their own thoughts.

She stared up at the ceiling, "Subaru, what do you want to do?"

"Hm?"

"I've been thinking, almost everything that we've done together has been with the goal of getting access to the sacred dragon's blood," Emilia said.

"Yup, and then we found out it's all gone. What a waste of time," Subaru sighed.

"So what do you think we should do now? There's not much point to the royal selection anymore is there?" Emilia asked.

"I'm surprised to hear you say that, Mili. Don't get me wrong, I'm *glad* that you said it but I'm surprised that you're willing to walk away from the selection so easily. You're just so responsible," Subaru replied.

"I don't know about that, Subaru, but like you said, we could still help the world without winning the throne and we wouldn't have to deal with the nobility or all the other facets of royal life," Emilia replied, "Because, honestly, that all made me miserable."

"I have to agree," Subaru replied, "I won't miss all that royal selection crap in the slightest."

"Then do you think we should just focus on taking our initiatives world wide without the burdens of the selection?"

Subaru shrugged, "If that's what you think we should spend our lives doing, it's fine with me, Mili."

Emilia was quiet for a long moment, "Subaru, that wasn't really what I was asking."

"What *were* you asking?"

"I was asking you what *you* wanted. I knew that you'd support me in whatever I decided to do, but what do you want? What if I'd like to support you for a change?" Emilia asked.

"I don't think I understand," Subaru replied.

"Subaru, what do *you* want? What would make *you* happy?"

"Um... being with you and Beatrice?"

"Isn't there anything else?"

"Well, you make me *really* happy, Emilia," Subaru replied.

"And you make me very happy as well, Subaru. But what would you find fulfilling in your own life? We were talking about increasing our efforts to end hunger, empty the slums, and seek out equal rights for demi-humans. But are those things that *you* want to do, things that would make you happy or are they just things that you'd do because you think that they would make *me* happy?"

"Um. Well doing them wouldn't make *unhappy*," He said, "I don't know. I don't really have any goals of my own so I guess I just adopted yours."

"How come?"

"I don't know!" Subaru said awkwardly, "I mean, I spent years thinking I was an absolute loser, you know. Maybe losers don't deserve to have dreams and goals so I pushed them all down and tried to focus on other people. If I ever had a goal for myself, I forgot about it a long time ago. I mean, if you're absolutely worthless as a human being, then at least you can still help other people, you know? That gives you a sort of a value," Subaru coughed self-consciously, "I... guess you probably wouldn't understand that."

Emilia's eyes widened as she stared at Subaru.

"Emilia? What's wrong? What did I say?" He asked in concern.

She shook her head, "Nothing. It's just that... I understand exactly what you mean. I guess I just... never thought that you felt the same way."

Subaru scratched his chin, "We should try to grab another hour of sleep, Mili. The sun will be up soon and we have a long couple of days in front of us."

Emilia nodded and Subaru settled down and finally began to snore, but Emilia found that sleep eluded her.

Everyone was up with the sun and Subaru dug into the bag that Rem had prepared. They hadn't opened it last night since everyone had been too tired to be hungry but now Emilia and Subaru's stomachs demanded food.

"Let's see what she packed. Hopefully Rem wasn't feeling petulant enough to try to starve us," Subaru muttered.

Subaru opened the bag Rem had packed and found some dried fruits which he passed around and a few gourds of water.

"So, Subaru, if we can't go any further west," Puck said munching on some fruit, "Where are we going?"

Subaru sighed, "I guess we'll start heading back east and then south, toward the capitol," He paused, "Or maybe we could head south sooner and go back toward Arlem village. We're likely to find *somebody* friendly there. Even Fredericka might be useful, assuming she doesn't try to back stab me again," He muttered.

"East?" Emilia echoed, "But the Witch Cult is looking for us there."

"No, the Witch Cult was looking for us there *before*," Subaru corrected, "After they spent the night combing the area and found nothing, they'll have moved on. This is probably our safest chance to get through there and get out of dodge," Subaru said with a confidence he did not feel.

Beatrice rubbed her chin, "There is wisdom there, I suppose, but not enough that I would readily agree to such a course," She said dubiously.

Subaru sighed, "Listen, if anyone has another idea," He said reasonably, "I am very happy to entertain it."

No one said anything.

"Hang on, I want to check something," Subaru said walking over to the trunk. He triggered *Indomitable* and broke the lock with a single strike.

He opened the trunk and dug through it a bit.

"Anything useful?" Puck asked.

"Clothes," Subaru replied pulling out a couple of hooded robes. He sniffed one and winced, "They don't smell very good but they might help us stay in disguise."

"Why do we need a disguise?" Emilia asked.

"You're beautiful, Mili," Subaru pointed out with a small smile, "Which is great but it also means you attract a lot of attention. Puck and I checked that dirt road outside the field before we came back. Judging by the tracks, there's been a lot of traffic on these roads lately. Whatever is going on, everyone in the area is trying to get clear of it. A few more travelers on the road won't attract too much attention, as long as we disguise ourselves a little."

"We're going to be traveling on the road now?" Puck asked dubiously, "Isn't that a little risky?"

Subaru shrugged, "It's also something that the Witch Cult won't expect. Beyond that, no matter who is fighting in that field out there, the Kingdom won't be able to ignore a pitched battle in their own territory. If all the Kingdom's forces aren't here yet they soon will be, that means we have good odds of encountering some friendly faces while we walk. If we bump into Witch Cultists they might look right by us now that we don't smell of the witch's miasma any more."

"And if the Witch Cult *does* recognize us, in fact?" Beatrice asks.

Subaru shrugged, "Then we either fight or run for our lives," He answered simply. "But what's the alternative? Wander around randomly in the woods until we bump into somebody we hope is friendly? That's the same risk we'd face if we took the road plus it gives us the benefit that we can chart our course."

Emilia thought about it, "Subaru, I think this is just too risky. Let's *follow* the road but stay off of it. If we're partially hidden in the woods then we can decide whether the people we see are ones we should risk revealing ourselves to or not. And if not, it should be easier to hide and vanish if we're still in the woods."

"Sounds good," Subaru agreed, "But remember the road leaves the woods and frequently cuts across plains. There won't be anyplace to hide once we do that. When that happens we should all get on the road. If we can't hide then it's better not to look like we're *trying* to hide because that attracts attention."

Emilia nodded.

Beatrice sighed, "Why is Betty surrounded by all these sneaky people?"

They had been walking in the woods for hours, following the road from a distance. The sun was starting to go down.

Subaru peered down the road, "You know, I think that big field up ahead might be where we said goodbye to everyone," Subaru mused.

"So we've taken twenty four hours to go in a really big circle, I suppose," Beatrice muttered from atop Subaru's shoulder.

"Yeah, maybe next time I need to plan things out better," He sighed.

Beatrice looked at him with concern, "Betty was not being critical, in fact. Betty is just frustrated."

"I get it, Beako. I'm worn out and frustrated too. Whenever we straighten this mess out, I think we're all due for a long vacation," Subaru replied.

"What would we do on vacation, I suppose?"

"I don't know. Anything that takes us a long way away from fanatical witch cultists, royal selections, and anyone else trying to kill us. Maybe we could rent a little cottage somewhere and just relax for a week or two."

"Sounds great," Puck replied.

"Betty would have to bring a lot of books, in fact. Subaru and Betty are far behind on their nightly reading."

"Or maybe we could take a trip," Subaru mused, "I kept wishing that you both were on that journey across the plains with Beatrice and me. It was very peaceful."

"Both?" Puck asked in confusion.

Subaru sighed, "You and Emilia," He explained.

Puck looked at Emilia darkly, "I keep forgetting that you think you've known Emilia since before we went to the Sanctuary."

Emilia hung her head.

"I don't *think* I know that, I do know that. I get that our memories have diverged but I need you both to trust me right now. We have huge problems and fighting among ourselves is a problem we can't afford," Subaru said.

Beatrice tapped Subaru's shoulder and gestured for him to put him down.

He lowered the spirit to the ground with a curious look on his face.

Beatrice looked at Subaru calmly, "Subaru, how certain are you?"

"Of what?"

"Of the elf. How confident are you that she's not just manipulating all of us," Beatrice asked calmly.

"What are you trying to say?" He asked.

Puck drifted over to Subaru and gave him a stern look, "Subaru, almost all of our problems right now are centered around the fact that we're traveling with a witch."

Subaru opened his mouth but Puck shook his head, "Don't talk, Subaru! Just listen to me for a second! Everyone is hunting us down because of this girl. It looks like even the Witch Cult is after us because of her. You have to admit that if we just sent her away, most of our problems would be solved."

Emilia took a deep breath, "You're right. I'm just putting all of you in danger. We should split up. I'll go-"

"Stop talking, little elf," Beatrice muttered, "This is a family discussion, I suppose. You are not involved."

Emilia flinched and wandered off a short distance in the forest to give them some privacy.

"Subaru," Beatrice continued, "Bubby and Betty are on your side no matter what. If you say that we are going to protect this witch with our lives then that is fine, I suppose. But Bubby and Betty deserve to know how certain you are that this... 'whatever-it-is', manipulated *our* memories and not yours. We deserve to know what we're risking our lives for. How confident are you that the elf is someone worth risking your life over?"

Subaru took a deep breath, "Well Beako, I'd say I'd be my life on Emilia being someone worth risking my life for, but we both know I gamble that pretty foolishly on a regular basis. So let's say, that I'd bet both of your lives on the fact that Emilia is a wonderful person, because you know I'd much rather gamble my life than either of yours. I'd want to die a thousand times before I ever let anything happen to either of you."

"Subaru!" Puck said in annoyance.

Beatrice held Subaru's gaze for a long moment.

"Very well then," Beatrice said with a deep sigh, "Then there is nothing more to be said. If the little elf matters to you that much... then she matters to Betty. It won't be the first time Betty has dealt with witches, I suppose."

"What? Betty!" Puck objected.

Beatrice gave him a patient look.

"Subaru! That witch almost killed you! She almost took you away from us! Do you really expect me to just let that go?! Do you understand how long we waited to find you?! What the thought of... losing you... means to us..." Puck trailed off plaintively.

"You're not going to lose me, Puck," Subaru assured him, "We are family. We belong together and I'm going to do whatever it takes to keep us together. I promise."

Puck folded his arms and fumed in midair. He sulked for a long time then threw a glare at Emilia that was sharp enough to draw blood.

"Fine!" Puck said finally, "I'm on *your* side, Subaru, no matter what," The spirit admitted, emphasizing the 'your' with another scowl at Emilia. "But don't think for an instant I won't be watching that witch! If she tries to do anything to hurt our family again I'll obliterate her!"

"She won't make another mistake like that," Subaru assured him.

""Mistake,"" Puck muttered under his breath sarcastically.

The little spirit shook his head, "Fine." He gave in with bad humor.

Subaru gathered them both in his arms and cuddled the little spirits, "Thanks guys," He whispered, "You don't know what it means to me to hear you'll stand by me."

"Betty and Bubby will never leave Subaru, in fact," She whispered, "Subaru is Betty and Bubby's family."

"Forever and ever," Subaru agreed.

"Subaru?" Emilia called.

The spirits both sighed, "The little elf knows how to ruin tender moments, I suppose," Beatrice grumbled.

"Yeah, Mili?"

"I think... I think that the trailer is still there."

Subaru and the spirits rushed to Emilia's side.

Subaru recognized the field that they had raced across to escape the Cultists and the four Cultist bodies were still lying in the road being pecked at by crows.

Hidden within a grove of trees in the distance, the trailer was still there.

"What happened?" Emilia whispered in a frightened voice, "They were supposed to get away after we led pursuit off! Why is the trailer still there?!"

"Calm down," Subaru snapped at himself as much as Emilia, "We don't know what happened yet. Maybe... maybe..." Subaru groped for something to say, "Alright, let's get over there and take a look. We'll see what happened."

"Subaru, what if it's a trap?" Emilia asked.

"It's a lousy trap if it is," Subaru replied, "Are they really hoping that we'd go back to the trailer? Why? That's pretty bad bait, Mili. All the same let's try to stay under cover. We have no idea who might be around and watching."

As the sun set, the group slipped across the road and quickly hid in the same grove of trees that had protected them during their escape.

"Our journey has come full circle, I suppose," Beatrice muttered, "And Betty is still not back at her library."

Subaru raised a finger to his lips to signal for quiet. Beatrice nodded from his shoulder.

The group crept up to the trailer.

Subaru looked all around trying to spot anyone who might be watching them but he didn't see anything.

Subaru jumped up into the trailer's back door. Nothing appeared to be disturbed from when they had left but the frost flowers had finally melted.

"Felt?" Subaru called in a loud whisper.

They moved quickly up onto the driver's platform. The earth dragons were gone.

"Emilia, can you check the storage container in the trailer?" Subaru asked.

Emilia opened the small trunk, "Empty. Subaru, what do you think happened?"

Subaru considered using *Reason and Judgment* then decided against it. He didn't think he needed super intelligence to crack this riddle.

"It looks like they got away," Subaru replied.

"What if the Cultists captured them?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shook his head, "No bloodstains, no damage to the trailer, no signs of a struggle. Plus all the food supplies are gone which isn't something that the Cultists would do. I'm guessing that as soon as we left they decided to book it out of here. Keeping the trailer was pointless for only four people. They probably unhitched the earth dragons and either set them free or decided to ride them to safety."

Subaru paused, "Maybe Ram woke up," He mused.

"What makes you say that, Subaru?" Puck asked.

"It would be pretty hard to sit on an earth dragon with no saddle while carrying an unconscious person. It could be done but it wouldn't be easy. I'm guessing that if they took the dragons and rode away then Ram must have finally woken up," Subaru said.

"That's good," Emilia said, "It will certainly put Garf and Rem in a better mood."

"I like picturing the look on Garf's face when Ram refused to ride with him," Subaru snickered.

"Subaru," Emilia criticized, "That's awfully petty."

"Yeah, I'm like that sometimes," He admitted. Subaru scratched his chin thoughtfully, "OK, well there's nothing for us here."

"Except for basic shelter," Emilia pointed out, "If we really think that this isn't a trap and we're safe here for the moment, then this is probably a better place to spend the night than anywhere else we'll find nearby. I don't think I can walk much further tonight."

Subaru reached into the bag that Rem had packed and pulled out a jar of dried peaches. He took one from the jar and chewed it distastefully. It tasted old and waxy.

He then handed the jar of fruit to Beatrice who passed it to Emilia without even opening it.

"Beako? Don't you want to eat anything?" Subaru asked as Emilia ate a peach.

"Bubby and Betty don't get hungry, in fact."

"I know, Beako, but I thought you enjoyed eating with us," Subaru replied.

"Betty does enjoy eating with Subaru, I suppose. However, our journey is currently one without definite duration and scope. We may need to save the food for those who need it."

Subaru sighed, "Well, you're right. But I can't say that's a happy thought..."

Subaru heard some noise coming from outside.

"What's that?" He muttered.

He peered out one of the trailer windows. Emilia and the spirits quickly joined him.

"What do you think it is?" Puck whispered to Subaru.

"I see some people. They look like soldiers I think. Four of them walking down the road," Emilia replied.

"Probably scouts," Subaru said pulling up his hood and almost gagging at the smell.

"Should we risk talking to them?" Beatrice whispered from just behind Subaru, "They might be Cultists in disguise, I suppose."

"Maybe," Subaru agreed, "But we might be able to get information from them and we desperately need some. You all stay here for a minute. If they just see me they won't think I'm a threat. And if they are Witch Cultists then they're looking for a group with an elf and two spirits so they shouldn't think anything of me."

"Subaru," Puck warned, "If those are Witch Cultists then they might kill you just for fun."

"Well, they may find that harder than they think," Subaru winked at him, "Besides I have good friends standing by to rescue me if it gets ugly."

Puck rolled his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

Subaru exited the trailer and moved quickly across the field before picking up the darkened road in a place the soldiers couldn't see. He tried to walk casually toward them.

Emilia and the spirits watched from the trailer.

"Puck, maybe we should sneak closer," Emilia whispered. "That way if something happens we'll be ready to help Subaru."

"You'll stay *right* where you are," Puck growled at her.

Emilia flinched.

Beatrice's gaze flickered between Emilia and Puck, "Betty thinks she has an idea for how we can monitor Subaru, I suppose."

Subaru was wondering what he should say as he approached the soldiers but they saved him the trouble.

"Halt, peasant!" A soldier with a tall feather in his helmet shouted imperiously.

Peasant?! Is that really how you talk to someone you just met?

"Me, sir?" Subaru replied politely.

"Do you see anyone else around here?" The officer asked in annoyance.

OK. I do not like you, Subaru grumbled to himself.

Regardless, he put a broad smile on his face, "What can I do for you, sir?"

The officer glared at him, "Have we forgotten how to make our manners?"

Who the hell is this jerk?! How does a peasant greet an army officer? And why does he expect me to know that?

"I can't forget, sir," Subaru shrugged, "I never knew."

"Ignorant trash, you-" The officer snarled.

"Sir? Is there really a point to teaching proper etiquette to a filthy peasant?" Another soldier asked wearily.

I'd like to dispute the filthy part but in this funky robe that would be pretty hard. We're all going to need a bath after this. Possibly several.

The officer shook his head with a sigh, "I suppose not, corporal. Still, dark times are these when a traveling knave can make light of a man of noble blood."

The Witch Cult is on a rampage, there is a pitched battle of terrifying scope twenty miles away at most, the peasants are starving each winter, and the whole kingdom is facing down the barrel of a race war between humans and demi-humans any time now. But this guy thinks that a lack of respect to the nobility is the major problem? I'm starting to think I know what's wrong with this kingdom and the French solved the same issue by introducing the guillotine.

"Peasant, what are you doing in this region? Are you unaware that all persons were bidden to evacuate for their own safety?" The officer demanded.

Subaru activated *Reason and Judgment*.

Alright. You should think this over carefully. And try not to waste too much time thinking about how much better this idiot would look with your Indomitable fist driven straight through his torso.

Everyone was told to evacuate? The man is an idiot if he assumes that all the peasantry out here actually got that message, especially the ones living on isolated homesteads. You only fled the Sanctuary a few days ago. The evacuation order can't be any more than four or five days old at the most. To make certain that all the peasants in the area were informed of this order by now, much less were able to evacuate, the Kingdom would have to have been really motivated to keep all the peasantry out of harm's way. Somehow that doesn't jive with their priorities as far as you've seen.

More importantly it's clear that there's nothing to be gained from conversing with this man. He views you as subhuman and he'd never agree to answer any of your questions unless you reveal yourself for who you really are. But that should be a last resort. For one thing, you're not entirely sure who this fellow is or what his purpose is. You shouldn't disclose yourself or reveal the others to him until you are certain. More to the point, he would almost certainly refuse to believe that a peasant traveler in a dirty robe that reeks of years of mud is a royal candidate.

If you plan to get any information out of him, you will need to capture his interest. Perhaps by introducing yourself as a villager of Arlem who got separated from the rest? No matter who he is or what he's looking for, that might catch his attention. It's worth a try anyway.

Subaru restarted time.

"I'm afraid I'm not from around here, sir," Subaru apologized, "My name is Lucas of Arlem," Subaru said grabbing the name of one of Petra's friends.

"Arlem, did you say?" The officer said in a riveted tone.

OK, well I got his undivided attention. Hopefully that's a good thing.

"Yes, sir, my friends and I were fleeing the Sanctuary in a wagon and we were attacked by the Witch Cult. That's how I got separated from the rest," Subaru explained.

"Where did this happen?" He asked intently.

Subaru shrugged, "Can't really say, sir. I'd been wondering through the woods all night trying to find the road. No idea where I came from or how many circles I went in."

The officer sighed, "Regardless, perhaps you are still in a position to be useful to me."

"I'll try, sir," Subaru said cautiously.

"If you are a resident of Arlem village then you are doubtlessly aware of Lord Subaru."

"Oh, yes. I've met Subaru, sir," Subaru said biting his lip to avoid smiling.

"Lord Subaru, peasant," The officer grated, "Mind yourself when referring to the man likely to be the future King of this land. Disrespect for his majesty is a capital offense and it can be made retroactive, you know."

And the future king will get to deal with nobles just like you all day long. Hard to imagine why anybody wouldn't want the job.

"Lord Subaru, sir," Subaru said trying not to grind his teeth.

"Do you have any knowledge of his whereabouts?" The officer demanded.

"I know he fled the Sanctuary at the same time we did. We both drove north for a while before we separated at his urging to give our pursuers more targets. Why are you looking for him?" Subaru asked.

The officer seemed to debate answering, "There are unconfirmed reports that Lord Subaru has been abducted."

"Abducted?" Subaru echoed in surprise.

Did Felt think the Witch Cult captured me? Fuck, she must be worried sick.

"His retainers and companions believe that Lord Subaru may have been bewitched by the Witch of Envy and then abducted by her," The officer replied.

Subaru's jaw dropped.

What? No no no. This can't be happening. Who told the Lagunican army that I was abducted by Emilia? I mean, maybe Rem I guess might say something like this but Garf and Felt? They wouldn't do this to me... would they? And how do they even start to think that Emilia is the Witch of Envy? Just because she's a half-elf with silver hair? Her appearance is striking no argument but it can't be that unique.

Oh my God. The entire Kingdom is after Emilia now! If they think that she's the Witch of Envy then she's going to be killed on sight! I'd never persuade them to wait long enough to explain the situation to them. Beyond that, if everyone thinks that Emilia has bewitched me then they won't even listen to me anyway. If I've been mind controlled then everything I say is suspect.

Holy shit. Ever since the Sanctuary I've been saying that things simply can't get any worse and then somehow, in complete defiance of all reason and logic, they do!

Subaru took a ragged breath, "The Witch of Envy? Umm... that's a little hard to believe, sir. I always thought she was sealed away somewhere."

"That's what I said, Captain," Another soldier commented to the officer, "Maybe those maids, the little girl and the weird one were just confused. Lord Subaru was abducted by the Witch of Envy? Really?"

"I know Lord Subaru," Subaru quickly agreed, "I find it hard to accept that he would be bewitched and abducted so easily, sir."

"Regardless, that is the intelligence we have received," The officer said in annoyance to both Subaru and the soldier, "We are to locate Lord Subaru and bring him back!"

Subaru raised an eyebrow, "Um, no offense, sir, but what if Lord Subaru doesn't *want* to come with you? How do you plan to capture a man who killed a troll with his bare hands?"

"Hey!" A soldier gasped, "Is that story really true?! Were you there when Lord Subaru fought it?"

Subaru chuckled, "I was there and I was scared to death," Subaru replied honestly.

"Enough of this," The officer interjected, "We will locate Lord Subaru and liberate him from the witch. Those are our orders."

"Um," Subaru began, "What about Red- Sir Reinhard, Lord Subaru's knight? What does he say?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business, peasant," The captain snorted, "However, Sir Reinhard van Astrea is combing the country looking for his lord. He is determined to liberate him from the witch's spell and do justice upon her."

...And things just got worse yet again...

Subaru swallowed hard, "Well, best of luck to all of you. I certainly hope you find him," Subaru said in a faint voice, "Anyone know how far it is to Arlem from here?"

"Oh foot?" A soldier said dubiously, "Maybe two or three days. There's an army camp about fifteen miles up the road. If you head there maybe they could help you find-"

"Enough soldier, we have important business to do," The officer interrupted, "We can't be distracted by shepherding lost peasants. One side, knave!" The officer ordered Subaru as he deliberately pushed past Subaru so he could lead his small group down the road.

Subaru watched and waited until the soldiers were well down the road and then slipped back into the well hidden trailer and reunited with the others.

Puck looked unsettled, "Well, that was interesting!"

"You heard all that?" Subaru asked noticing Emilia's forlorn expression.

"We heard it all," Beatrice grumbled, "Betty's magic can be used to eavesdrop, I suppose."

Subaru closed his eyes and rested his forehead the trailer wall with a sigh.

"So, do we have a new plan, Subaru?" Puck asked.

Subaru laughed, "Why are you asking me, Puck?" He chuckled, "Ever since we went to the Sanctuary all my plans have gone belly up! Everything I try to do just makes things worse. I'm leading everybody from disaster to disaster..." Subaru sighed.

"That is *not* true," Emilia said firmly.

Subaru turned around and saw Emilia standing there looking angry. "Subaru, you helped me understand how I could pass the trials. Your plan let us get all the villagers out of the Sanctuary safely. Your plan allowed us to get away from Capella yesterday and that soldier told you that Garf, Felt, and the twins escaped safely as well. I know that we're all in a dire situation right now but none of this, *none* of it, can be laid at your feet. You've done everything possible to keep us safe and you will get us out of this mess yet!" Emilia proclaimed.

Puck stared at Emilia.

Beatrice nodded approvingly, "The elf speaks sense, Subaru."

Subaru laughed and pulled himself off the wall, "Thanks, Mili. I needed that."

Subaru rubbed his forehead with a sigh.

"So what's the new plan, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

Subaru shrugged, "I guess," He hesitated, "For right now we head back toward Arlem. They trust me there... I think."

"Of course they do!" Emilia said.

"Then maybe they'll give Emilia the benefit of the doubt when I tell them that she's OK," Subaru replied. "If we can just get a few people to say that she's not trying to hurt anybody, we might dull everyone's certainty that she's a witch. That gives us an opening to start negotiating for her safety."

"But, Subaru, won't the twins and maybe even Garf and Felt be at Arlem?" Puck asked.

"I don't know, Puck! But we have to take the chance! The whole world is after us right now and Arlem is pretty much our last possibility to find a potentially sympathetic audience. If we say that Arlem is a no-go, what's left? We run off to Gusteko or Kararagi? We don't have any particularly promising prospects there."

Puck took a long hard look at Emilia and finally sighed, "Alright, Subaru, you lead and we'll follow. We are a family. Betty and I are on your side, no matter what."

Beatrice nodded firmly.

Subaru sighed, "Alright, let's get some sleep. Maybe tomorrow will be better."

The spirits nestled against Subaru dozed off quickly but Subaru and Emilia were up longer. They were sleeping on opposite couches again and that just felt wrong. Puck and Beatrice had very reasonably pointed out how there wasn't room for two people on a single couch but Subaru suspected that they had ulterior motives for this.

What am I going to do? If that idiot soldier was right then the whole goddamn Kingdom is after Emilia! What the hell can I do to protect her? If they think she's the legendary Witch of Envy then they'll kill first and ask questions second. Not that they'll even bother to ask me any questions anyway! If they think I've been bewitched then nothing I say has any weight. If I beg them to leave Emilia alone, that's just a sign of how completely she's brainwashed me.

I hate to think of it this way but Reinhard is my knight and he's pledged to obey my orders. If I ordered him to leave Emilia alone, would he have to listen? Or does the code of chivalry make exceptions for not following your lord's commands when he's been mind-controlled by an evil witch?

What the hell can I do? Everyone thinks Emilia is a witch, there are armies after us, the Witch Cult has declared war on everybody, and the dragon blood is all gone.

Wait. Let's take a deep breath and focus. Right now there should be only one priority: Keep Emilia safe. Period.

You have to keep your family safe. Emilia, Beatrice, and even Puck need you right now. You need to keep it together.

You have two options: find friends who are willing to give Emilia a chance, or get the hell out of the country and disappear for a while.

Neither option is necessarily appealing. I think they trust me in Arlem but if I walk in there with the Witch of Envy at my side and try to convince them that's she's really a sweet girl named Emilia, will they just assume I'm crazy? And let's say that they do believe me. Let's say that they like Emilia and decide her resemblance to a famous monster is just an unfortunate accident. Great. Now Reinhard and Felt show up and tell everybody that I've been brainwashed and you can't trust a word I've said. Do they argue the point or just assume this was all some kind of ruse by the witch to trick them?

So do I run for the border? Well, that's not very appealing either. The closest border, and the only border that I have any real chance of reaching on foot, is Gusteko. The people there are probably still a little annoyed with me. I did kill a bunch of their troops. From what I've read, Gusteko is one of the worst countries in the world for demi-humans so Emilia will not get a warm reception there. There are only a few cities in Gusteko and the closest one is a huge trek to the northeast. No way our supplies will last that long and we aren't equipped to deal with the cold once we start entering the Gusteko mountains.

OK, so that's it then. Arlem is my only option. I go to Arlem and try to convince everyone to trust Emilia. If that fails maybe at least I can gather supplies. The chief might agree to give me clothes and provisions for the long march up into Gusteko.

It's a dumb plan. It only has the faintest chance of working, and if we don't gain acceptance from the Arlem villagers then we'll have to walk all the way north again but it's the only plan I've got.

Subaru sighed and slipped into a pensive sleep.

Something woke Emilia up in the middle of the night.

"Betty!" Puck whispered, "Wake up!"

"Ugh," Beatrice grumbled. "What is it, I suppose?"

"Subaru and the witch are fast asleep. We need to talk."

Emilia tried not to tense as she lay there with her eyes shut.

"What did Betty's Bubby want to talk about?"

"Betty, how far are we going to let this go?"

"Let what go, I suppose?"

"Subaru's fascination with this witch! She does nothing but put Subaru in danger both directly and indirectly. I don't believe for an instant that she had nothing to do with this memory modifying thing. She could lose control of her magic at any moment and this time she might actually kill Subaru. And now we know that everyone in the whole world wants her dead and that just puts Subaru in more danger!"

"Bubby's statements are true as far as they go, I suppose," Beatrice said with a yawn, "What do you propose that we do about it?"

Puck was silent.

"Bubby," Beatrice warned, "Taking the elf away would make Subaru *most* unhappy."

"Ugh! Betty! How can we let Subaru just wander around with someone who puts him in danger?"

"Betty thinks that all of our Subaru's friends have put him in danger at one time or another, I suppose. He seems to attract this type."

"Not like this, Betty! We need to get her away from him!"

"Subaru would object most strenuously to that plan, I suppose," Beatrice replied in a bored tone.

"Betty, Subaru is just a kid! He doesn't know what's best for him yet!" Puck hissed, "He's too soft hearted for his own good! That's why he needs us here to watch out for him."

"Betty *is* looking out for him. Bubby is looking out for him too, I suppose. What's the problem?"

"Betty, what happened? When did you go so soft on the witch?"

Beatrice hesitated, "When Bubby and Betty heard them talking in the forest. Betty saw how much Subaru cared for her. Betty understands now how much Subaru would be hurt if he lost her, I suppose."

"But it could all be the witchcraft making him think he loves the girl!"

"Perhaps. Are you willing to kill Subaru's love on a 'perhaps,' Bubby? Even if this theory were true, it is unlikely that killing the elf would undo the witchcraft."

Puck growled, "Alright, fine. How do we prove if Subaru is bewitched or not?"

Beatrice was quiet for a moment. "Betty has read stories about witches who charmed men this way, I suppose."

"Were any of them cured?" Puck asked.

"Yes. A knight was charmed by a witch. The spell was broken when the knight met his son and realized that the witch was not his mother."

"Well, honestly, Betty, unless Subaru has been keeping secrets, I don't think that's going to be too useful."

"The same principle applies, I suppose. The Authorities are supremely powerful but to modify one or more person's memories like this is a challenging endeavor. Because the son's mother was not the witch, simply replacing the mother with the witch in all of the knight's memories would have led to obvious inconsistencies because the witch and the mother would behave differently in a given situation. Correct for this and you'll have still more memories to fix because the outcomes of the remembered behaviors would differ. If, on the other hand, the witchcraft tried to make the son be forgotten about entirely, then more and more memories would need to be removed and the man's mind would become fragmented. It was the details that ultimately defeated this witchcraft, I suppose."

"OK, Betty, so how do we remove it?"

"Witchcraft is never perfect, I suppose. There is always a flaw. If Subaru has been bewitched, the witchcraft may be

strong enough to rewrite Subaru's memories but there's always some inconsistency that it can't cover up. Betty's Subaru isn't stupid. If the elf *has* bewitched him, in fact, then sooner or later Subaru will stumble over a paradox in his memories that even the witchcraft can't reconcile. Then he'll realize what is going on."

"OK, so at least there's hope then. Maybe we could try to get him to talk about the differences in his memories? Maybe that would highlight an inconsistency?"

"Perhaps," Beatrice mused, "Subaru is the thinker, not us, so Betty and Bubby would need to wait for him to solve the puzzle, I suppose. In any event, talking about memories might provide the answer to who is bewitched: us or Subaru."

"Wait, *us*? Betty, you don't really think that *everyone* was bewitched except Subaru, do you? I don't think that even an Authority could shift a Great Spirit's contract around the way Subaru claimed."

"Betty is simply keeping an open mind, I suppose. Betty trusts her Subaru. He will find the truth eventually and resolve this matter."

"Alright," Puck said grudgingly, "That makes sense. But we need to keep an eye on the witch. If she tries something else we need to end her hard and fast. We can apologize for it later if we're wrong."

"Do you truly think that Subaru would accept such an apology?" Beatrice asked skeptically.

"Betty, Subaru is my everything. I won't accept a world without Subaru. I'd destroy it before that happened."

"Betty agrees with the sentiment, I suppose, but Betty still plans to take a wait and see attitude. Betty trusts her Subaru. If he is bewitched, Subaru will unravel it. If the elf is cursed, Subaru will break it. It's just a matter of time."

"Stupid witch, messing up our family. First she almost kills our Subaru and then she gets the Witch Cult and the entire Kingdom after him. She's done nothing but put Subaru in danger! If she hurts Subaru again, I'll-" Puck grumbled.

"It's late, Bubby. Go back to sleep," Beatrice muttered.

The spirits settled down and went back to sleep.

Emilia lay there with her eyes shut for a long time until she was absolutely certain that Beatrice and Puck were unconscious.

And then she broke down and quietly cried herself to sleep.

The group was up with the sun. Subaru and Emilia ate a quick breakfast while the spirits again refused to partake. This alone made the food taste stale in Subaru's mouth.

The group marched south from the trailer following the road from the shadows of the nearby forests.

"I'm going to be honest," Subaru sighed, "I'm not really sure which way we're going at this point. The soldiers suggested we were headed toward Arlem but I don't know that I trust their sense of direction. We could be headed toward Arlem or the capitol. Personally, I am completely lost."

"Hey, anywhere is better than where people are looking for us, Subaru," Puck observed.

They walked through the forests until noon when the forests finally thinned out. Before them was a large plain with more forests visible far in the distance.

Subaru scratched his head with a sigh, "OK. We're out of hiding places so we're going to walk boldly down the road. We can't hide so we want to be so boring that nobody notices us. Mili, keep your hood up and your head down. Beatrice, any chance you could change your clothing to something... less vibrant?"

Beatrice made a face, "It is an emergency, I suppose. What colors are less vibrant?"

"Honestly? Try gray. We're basically pretending to be peasant refugees so anything that makes your clothes look old and worn out will help.

Beatrice scowled but raised a hand and her pink and red clothing faded to various shades of gray. A moment later her outfit changed into a hooded robe that covered everything above her gray tights. It looked like the clothes of someone who had gone through hard times recently.

"Puck, the other thing is that they're looking for a group of four and frankly a magic flying cat attracts a lot of attention," Subaru said apologetically.

"So, nap time?" Puck said with a yawn.

"Sorry, buddy," Subaru said shamefaced.

"Nothing to apologize for, Subaru. I'm always happy to take a nap. Frankly it's weird not having to go into the crystal as much since I met you."

Subaru blinked and looked at Emilia who shared his puzzled look, "Huh?"

"I'm not as hungry for mana since we contracted, Subaru. I guess it's part of your Authority but ever since we

contracted instead of getting tired and needing to rest every sunset, I feel like I can just keep going and going. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to go into the crystal and take a nap but I'm not really tired so call me if you need me."

Subaru scratched his chin, "OK, Puck. Thanks."

The little cat disappeared and in his pocket, Subaru felt the crystal pulse with warmth for a moment.

The trio continued to walk down the road.

Subaru was deep in thought, "Beako, have you noticed any changes since we made our contract?" He asked.

Beatrice shrugged, "Betty doesn't require as much mana as her Bubby does, I suppose. Also because Betty loves her Bubby, she tries to always make sure there is plenty of mana left over for him."

"Aren't you a wonderful sister?" Subaru complimented you, "I say that from personal experience by the way. You're my favorite sister."

"Betty is your only sister!"

"That did make the choice easier," Subaru admitted.

Beatrice smirked, "Betty is wonderful in many ways, I suppose, but she never tires of hearing it."

Subaru kissed her cheek, "Guess I better say it a little more often."

He reached out his hand toward Emilia who was standing there, looking left out and forlorn. After a moment she took it.

Together the three went down the road.

They walked for most of the day and Subaru had no idea where the road they followed was going. He thought he was still headed toward Arlem after the discussion with the soldiers, but who knew how reliable their directions were.

Emilia and Beatrice were both exhausted. Emilia was somber and Beatrice was snippy so after a while he stopped trying to engage them in conversation.

Come on, Subaru. Pick it up! Your girls need you! They're depending on you to keep their spirits up. It's all on you, Subaru. Think of something to get Emilia and Beatrice talking. Find a way to take their minds off their troubles.

"Hey, Emilia, did I ever tell you about how Beako and I learned to ride an earth dragon?" Subaru mused.

"You rode an earth dragon?" Emilia asked.

"Betty is *not* going to like this story, I suppose," Beatrice grumbled.

"Yeah, Roswaal left us a riding earth dragon at the manor so that we could follow you to the Sanctuary. Beako found the ride most stimulating," Subaru continued with an angelic smile.

Beatrice pinched Subaru's cheek firmly, "Betty did not enjoy that experience, in fact!" She snapped

"What?" Subaru asked painfully as Beatrice held him by his cheek, "You didn't enjoy it? But you were saying such lovely things to me during the trip."

"The only land monster Betty wishes to ride is Betty's Subaru!" She retorted.

"Beatrice," Emilia murmured looking unsettled, "What are you doing to Subaru?"

"Betty's Subaru often thinks that it's funny to annoy Betty so that Betty will punish him! Subaru is an overgrown child who causes trouble because he enjoys getting caught!" Beatrice informed her still pinching the side of Subaru's face.

"Hey, can we talk about this?" Subaru moaned through a numb cheek.

Emilia chuckled, "I'm well aware of his bad habits. Do you remember when he tried to use his engine to blow me out the window?"

Beatrice's eyes widened at Emilia's question and she let go of Subaru's cheek, "...No, Betty doesn't remember this, I suppose... But only a few people knew that Subaru's engine was briefly the world's most powerful fan..."

Emilia gave her a tired smile, "I was there, Beatrice. Just like I was there all those nights that you and Subaru read to each other from your book before bedtime."

Beatrice looked unsettled and she gazed off into the distance.

OK, well, it wasn't what I was hoping for but maybe it could be good anyway. Beatrice looks like she's debating if maybe Emilia is telling the truth.

Or maybe she's just worried that Emilia can read minds...

Damn. Beatrice still looks frustrated and Emilia still looks depressed. I didn't accomplish anything. Can't I think of some way to perk them up? We need to stick together and we need to keep our morale high which is really hard when we

don't actually have a strategy and we're just grasping at straws for ideas.

Jeez, Subaru, you suck!

They passed groups of soldiers frequently but none of them paid much attention to the group. Emilia and Beatrice kept their hoods up and the soldiers looked right past them.

Eventually they passed a man who looked too young to be wearing his uniform, digging ditches beside the road.

"Excuse me, sir," Subaru called to him, "Do you know how far it is to Arlem village from here?"

The boy stopped digging, "Are you from Arlem village?"

Subaru hesitated a moment and wracked his brain but he could think of no other reason that three people walking down the road would be asking such a question, "Yes..."

"Do you know anything about Lord Subaru, sir?" The soldier asked.

"I know him," Subaru admitted.

"Do you have any idea where he is?"

"I'm guessing that he's wandering around lost in the woods somewhere. Isn't that what all of us are doing right now?" Subaru sighed.

Emilia covered a giggle with a cough.

The boy looked slightly pained, "I don't think that a great hero like Lord Subaru would get lost so easily, sir."

A great hero?! Is that supposed to be a joke?!

"Listen kid, I know Subaru pretty well," Subaru said with a sigh, "Don't get me wrong he's a nice guy but he's also an enormous dunderhead."

The boy stared at him wide eyes, "Should you be talking about Lord Subaru that way, sir?"

"Kid, trust me. Subaru would be fine with me talking about him this way."

"Really?" The boy asked in surprise.

"Oh yeah. Give Subaru half a chance and he's very likely to tell you himself just how much he sucks," Subaru sighed.

Subaru felt a jab from behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Emilia glowering at him, "Subaru! Quit it!" She mouthed.

"Gee. I'd heard that he was casual with people beneath his station but that's a really impressive amount of humility," The boy murmured approvingly.

An impressive amount of humility?! Seriously?! Kid, this is 'Lord Subaru' bowing to fucking reality! Subaru is a loser who thought he had all the answers. Subaru has now been thrown into the deep end of the pool and is just figuring out that he can't fucking swim. Subaru is a guy who is finally accepting that he's in WAY WAY over his head. Also, I'd love to tell this kid that this paragon of humility he's referring to is actually the fucking Witch of Pride.

Subaru was about to ask him for directions when the boy interrupted him, "Sir, if you were at the Sanctuary, could you tell me if the stories are true?"

"What stories?" Subaru asked with a sigh.

"They say that Lord Subaru killed two of the Sin Archbishops with his bare hands! They even say that one of them was Petelguese Romanee-Conti, the scourge of the continent!"

Subaru rubbed his face. *I know I should be flattered. All of this stupid praise should be inflating my ego and making my Authority stronger but it's all fucking lies! Regulus killed Petelguese, not me. How am I supposed to be proud of that? We killed Roy by the skin of our teeth and frankly it had more to do with his magic... backfiring on him somehow and making him sick than anything we did.*

Come to think of it, why did that happen to Roy? If we have to fight Ley again, it might be good to know.

Subaru nodded, "Yeah, Petelguese is dead," He said shortly.

"You saw it?!" The boy asked his eyes shining.

"Not among my favorite memories but yes," Subaru admitted.

"Wow! I can't wait to tell everybody in the platoon!"

"Um, can you give me directions? I'm just trying to get my wife and sister someplace safe right now," Subaru reminded him.

The boy stared at Beatrice who sat on Subaru's shoulder, "I don't mean to be offensive, sir, but isn't she a little young to be married?"

Is this boy trolling me?! Nobody could be this stupid by accident!

"This is my sister," Subaru sighed.

"Oh. Right. That does make more sense. Sorry, sir. I'm not very clever. That's why I'm out here digging these ditches for the Sarge," The boy explained.

Subaru glanced around.

He's digging ditches by the road in the middle of nowhere. Why do I get the funny impression that his Sarge just wanted to get rid of him for a couple of hours?

"Anyway, could you tell me how to get to Arlem from here?" Subaru asked.

The boy scratched under his helmet, "Can't rightly say, sir. I just followed the column here, honestly. But if you keep following this road you'll come to our base camp. I'm sure somebody there could direct you."

Subaru nodded, "Thank you, have fun with your digging."

"Thank you, sir!" The boy said cheerfully, continuing to chop into the ground.

The enormous army camp was built across the road like a small city. It had a wooden palisade erected around it and several watchtowers.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, "Are we actually going to go into the camp?"

"I don't see that we have much choice," Subaru muttered, "They're camped right across the road which tells me they want everyone heading south to pass through their camp and be questioned. They have lookouts who are going to be very suspicious if we get off the road so sneaking around the camp doesn't seem to be a realistic option and will just attract attention. We'll just keep our heads down, stay quiet, and we'll get out of there before anyone recognizes us."

Subaru marched up to the large army camp and saw two men in full armor guarding the gate.

"Halt!" One cried, "Identify yourselves!"

"My name is Lucas, sir," Subaru said lowering his hood, *Hopefully I can get him to focus too much on me to pay any attention to Emilia. Luckily, I'm so dirty and mud stained that no one would ever take me for this vaunted 'Lord Subaru.'* "This is my wife Petra and my little sister Betty."

"Where are you coming from?" The soldiers asked.

"Up north, sir," Subaru said trying to sound both servile and stupid, "My family farms the land on a small homestead out in the woods. Hard work but we do alright. We got a message telling us that we had to evacuate so we decided to head south to see my brother in-" Subaru tried to remember the map, "Hanumas," He said referring to a town south of Arlem.

"You're walking to Hanumas?" The soldier asked with surprise and some sympathy.

"Well, the thing is, sir," Subaru replied, "My family doesn't have anywhere else to go! I don't know quite what's going on up there but there was lightning and thunder and explosions. I decided it was time to get my family out while the getting was good."

"Good thinking," The soldier replied.

"Can you give me some directions, sir? Are we still going the right way?"

"Yes. Keep going down this road and in a day or two you should hit the King's Highway. It will lead you south through Arlem and Hannumas," He said.

"Thank you, sir. Much obliged to you," Subaru said with a slight bow.

"If you and your family are hungry, the cooks are already preparing dinner. Camp rations I'm afraid but we've been told to offer it to any hungry travelers during this crisis. Orders of Lady Karnstein," The guard said.

Crusch is mixed up in this? Is that bad or good? Maybe it doesn't much matter right now.

"Thank you kindly, sir, but I think we'll keep heading down the road. We can probably get a bit further today before we call it a night," Subaru replied.

The soldier nodded and stepped aside, "Safe journey."

Subaru held Emilia's hand as they walked through the busy camp. It was very much like the camps he had slept in during the Whale Hunt, everybody was yelling and rushing in one direction or another. Subaru spied the ornate tent of the camp commander and hurried past it as fast as he could. The commander might be Crusch or one of the officers he had met during the Whale Hunt.

Subaru could actually see the other gate in the distance when he heard a familiar voice: "...my magnificent self kicked all their asses!"

"Garf!" Subaru gasped and he felt Emilia grip his hand tighter.

Oh shit. This is bad. If Garf is here then is Felt? Rem? Reinhard?

Could you talk to Reinhard? Convince him? Rem and Felt are probably a lost cause right now but maybe Garf and Reinhard could be persuaded to trust you.

No, that's a terrible idea. If you fail to convince him, you'll be in a pitched battle with not only Garf and Reinhard, although that's more than enough, but an entire army of hundreds of soldiers trying to kill Emilia as well. Plus everyone thinks that you've been brainwashed. Nobody is going to listen to you right now. You need to get out of here.

Fuck, don't panic. You look just like ten thousand other refugees that Garf and everyone else have already ignored today. Just keep your head down and keep walking. You'll be out of here in two minutes.

Subaru was sweating bullets by the time they walked out of the camp and it took everything he had not to simply start running.

"Seriously, fleabag? Do you really have to piss off everyone you meet?" Felt asked in exasperation as she and Garfiel returned to their tent. It was large enough for four people to sleep in and they could even stand up comfortably inside although it was just four sleeping rolls spread out on the ground.

Garfiel flung himself down on his sleeping roll with a triumphant grin. "Heh. I feel like the person my magnificent self pisses off is mainly you, shrimp! Besides, what's the big deal? I was just having some fun with those grumps."

"Arm wrestling Crusch's personal guards?" Felt demanded rolling her eyes, "Can you really not even imagine any way that might come back to bite us?"

"It was all in good fun," Garfiel said dismissively.

"I know that *you* had fun, fleabag! I'm just not so sure about the ten guards that you beat, especially the one that needed to have his arm put in a sling! Nice job taunting them after they lost too!" Felt snapped.

"Come on, shrimp, you're such a scaredy cat! This is the army! It's a place for a man to be a man and it's the perfect place for my magnificent self since I just happen to be the ultimate man!" Garfiel laughed.

Felt buried her face in her hands, "Ugh, fleabag! Why don't you grow a brain?!"

"Why don't you grow some tits?" Garfiel snorted with a grin.

"Garf, you're the dumbest man I've ever met in my life. There is never any blood flowing through your brain, fleabag, and I don't know where the rest is going because that tiny-ass dick of yours can't hold much!" Felt snapped with a vicious smile.

"Listen, shrimp, your little ass-" Garfiel began but something grabbed Garfiel's ear and jerked his head around.

Garfiel found himself looking up into Rem's coldly impassive face, "Garf, do we need to discuss the proper way to speak to a woman?" She asked calmly.

Garfiel's eyes were wide as he shook his head back and forth violently.

Rem let go of Garfiel's ear.

Felt sighed, "Rem, you know, you didn't really have to get involved in that. We were doing just fine on our own."

"I will never understand why the two of you seem to enjoy insulting one another," Rem commented.

"Rem, just cause you don't understand something, that doesn't necessarily make it bad!" Felt pointed out.

"Hey, how's Ram?" Garfiel interrupted before Rem could respond.

Rem glanced at him, "Sister is doing well. Felix expects her to be back on her feet tomorrow although he recommends that we seek out a few specialists in the capitol before returning home. Also," Rem continued turning to face Garfiel squarely, "Sister expressed her gratitude for my taking you in hand during her incapacitation but she assures me that tomorrow she expects to be able to resume disciplining you personally."

Garfiel swallowed hard.

"Heh. You know, fleabag," Felt drolled, "If you're *really* into this kind of stuff, I know a professional. She's expensive but I'm told that she's worth it."

"Hey!" Garfiel protested, "Nothing wrong with a man finding a strong woman who knows what she wants attractive!"

"Garf, there is a limit-" Felt sighed.

"I smell a witch," Rem whispered.

Garfiel and Felt stared at her.

"Where?" Felt asked.

"They just passed through the camp," Rem continued.

"Must be a cult spy," Felt muttered.

"Let's get after them! Before they get away!" Garfiel said leaping to his feet.

"We need to tell everyone," Felt objected.

"There isn't time, Miss Felt," Rem said picking up her mace, "The trail is already fading. We must pursue the cultist. Quickly now!" Rem set off at a run.

"Hell ya!" Garfiel shouted scoping up Felt and tucking her under one arm.

"What the fuck are you doing, fleabag?!" Felt shouted as Garfiel leaped after Rem, "Stop carrying me around like fucking luggage! I have a Blessing! I can keep up!"

The pair pounded through the camp at full speed scattering soldiers.

"One side, guys!" Garfiel roared at the gate guards. The two soldiers leaped back as Rem and Garfiel charged out of the camp, Felt still bitterly complaining as Garfiel carried her under one arm like a football.

"Wait! Do you have permission-" The guard trailed off as the three raced into the woods and out of sight.

"If Garfiel was there, then who else?" Emilia asked a mile down the road.

Subaru shook his head, "I don't know. Nor do I want to find out right now."

They walked in silence for a few moments while Beatrice dozed on his shoulder.

"Subaru, what is our plan?" Emilia asked.

"We go back to Arlem and try to convince all of them that you're not evil. And we may also need to convince them that I'm really Subaru," He added, "I probably look and smell like a stable boy right now."

"Do you really think that they'll listen to you about me?"

"They better. I think it's fair to say they owe me one. And if they tell people that Emilia wasn't an evil witch and she was very nice to them, then maybe Reinhard won't come after us with his sword drawn. All we have to do is convince him to wait and watch before making up his mind."

Emilia sighed, "Subaru, after I almost killed Felt, I'm not sure that Reinhard is going to be in the mood to listen to us."

"He'll definitely be angry. Probably angry at both of us, and frankly I don't blame him," Subaru admitted, "But Reinhard is a good person, one of the best. He's not going to be willing to kill someone in cold blood unless he's absolutely certain that they need to die."

"What if he thinks this person bewitched his lord?" Emilia asked in a small voice.

"...Yeah. That's the bigger problem," Subaru admitted, "As long as that's everyone's working theory, nobody is going to listen to anything I say."

Subaru scratched his chin, "Well, at least we're back in some woods so we can get off the road again."

Subaru let go of Emilia's hand and reached into his pocket to touch the crystal, "Puck," He whispered.

The magical cat appeared in mid air in front of him.

"Hey, Subaru. What did I miss?" Puck asked drifting down into Beatrice's arms to be petted.

"Nothing particularly interesting, buddy." Subaru shrugged, "But we got lonely so we decided to wake you up."

"Aw, it's so nice to be loved," He smiled as Beatrice cuddled him.

Subaru heard a voice behind him, "-This way?"

It was Garfiel's voice.

"Subaru!" Emilia whispered.

"Come on!" Subaru hissed grabbing her hand and taking off at a run deeper into the forest.

They ran like this for twenty minutes but the voices always seemed to be on their trail.

How are they following us? We're not leaving any tracks in this soft grass! Could it be a coincidence, maybe Garf was just headed in the same direction?

Yeah, right. But the fact is that they're catching up so we better try something else.

Subaru spotted a small cave, "This way quick!" He hissed pulling Emilia along.

They huddled inside the cave, "Beako, I need an illusion. Can you use your magic to make it look like we're not here?" Subaru whispered.

Beatrice nodded and raised her hand. The world around Subaru turned purple as if he was peering through stained glass. He could still see everything outside but he took it on faith that Beatrice's magic would keep anyone from seeing inside.

The voices got closer.

"Wait? It smells like the Captain?!" Garfiel exclaimed.

A few moments later Rem, Garf, and Felt walked into the cave. Rem had her morning star in hand.

They all looked around the small cave.

"Where to now, Rem?" Garfiel asked.

"This is where the trail ends. The miasma is strongest here," She replied.

"Then where did they go?" Felt asked in a tired voice.

"I'm uncertain," Rem replied, "The trail ends here."

Emilia looked at Subaru but he shook his head and put a finger to his lips.

Garfiel scratched his chin, "Maybe it wasn't actually the Captain. Maybe this is the den of some mabeast or something that came too close to camp and Rem caught a whiff of it."

"That is possible," Rem admitted.

"I knew this was going to be a wild goose chase as soon as Rem mentioned Subaru," Felt muttered, "Whatever that witch has the boss doing, I doubt that he's just wandering around the countryside hiding out in caves."

"Alright, whatever. Let's head back to the camp before dinner starts. I hate it when they run out," Garfiel grumbled.

"They don't run out, fleabag, you just don't always get to have three servings," Felt sighed.

"Hey! I'm a growing boy!" Garfiel protested.

"How big are you planning on getting?" Felt snickered as she walked out of the cave.

"Hey, just cause you're a little shrimp, don't ruin it for the rest of us!" Garfiel snorted, following Felt. He paused, glancing back at Rem, "Rem, you coming?"

"I'll be along in a moment. I need to relieve myself and the cave is a preferable place to the camp latrines."

Garfiel looked thoughtful, "Well, do you want us to-"

"I do not require an audience, Garf," Rem replied calmly, "Nor do I need an escort to walk a few hundred yards back to camp. Return with Felt, I will be along shortly."

She's about to use the bathroom? Oh shit. I don't want to see Rem like this! Subaru thought as Garf left the cave.

Rem turned and looked at what must have been a blank wall to her.

"You can come out now, Subaru Natsuki," She said calmly.

The group looked at each other.

"I am not a complete fool. I can smell the miasma coming from a blank wall," Rem continued. "This is a common trick of Lady Beatrice and Lord Roswaal."

Subaru made a face and then looked at Beatrice and nodded.

Beatrice waved her hand and the barrier disappeared.

Subaru stood up and stepped in front of Emilia and the spirits protectively, "So what now?"

"I believe that I feel sufficiently 'relived.' Therefore, I am going back to camp," Rem said impassively.

She turned to leave the cave.

Subaru frowned, "Why did you help us back there?"

Rem stopped, "Believe me, Subaru Natsuki. I didn't help *you*. I helped young Garf and Felt. If I had revealed you to them they would have attacked the witch."

Subaru blinked, "What? I thought Garf had learned not to pick fights he can't win."

"Young Garf is well aware of the fact that he couldn't win. He considers that the genius of his plan," Rem said still facing away from him.

"Care to enlighten me?"

"Young Garf has immense respect for his Captain. He wishes to follow you, Subaru Natsuki. His plan to save you from this witchcraft was to throw himself at the witch with everything he had. To throw himself toward certain destruction and he has convinced Miss Felt to join him in this attack."

Subaru scratched his head, "No way. Felt is way too smart to do that."

"Sometimes the heart blinds the head, Subaru Natsuki. Miss Felt loves you. She has placed you on a pedestal and sees you as a man worth revering. A man who could truly change this world for the better. This is why she is willing to risk her life in this senseless attack that Garf proposed. Garf convinced her that his Captain, the man they both so admire, would never physically turn against them, nor permit them to die in battle against a witch. If his Captain were to see them fighting in hopeless battle to free him from her terrible influence, the scales would finally fall from his eyes and, with Subaru Natsuki once more beside them, they could vanquish the evil witch and reunite their team," Rem turned to face Subaru, her face still impassive, "I think that young Garf would be... disappointed if he attempted this plan and asked you to choose between them and the witch, would he not?"

Subaru swallowed hard, "I would... never let Garf and Felt die."

"As I thought," Rem said impassively, "You would choose to sacrifice Garf and Felt to protect the witch. You would sacrifice all of us to save her."

Subaru's mouth opened but he didn't know what to say.

"I know that you are no Witch Cultist, Subaru Natsuki. I knew that I was wrong about you the night I tried to kill you," Rem said in a flat voice. "When you knocked away my mace with your bare hand I knew this was a fight I couldn't win. I expected to die when you tore my mace out of my hand. But instead you just stood there staring at me. You actually looked scared!"

Subaru sighed, "Rem, you had just flung a mace at my face. I feel like I was justified in being scared."

"Then you told Reinhard not to kill me. That was when I understood that I had made a terrible mistake. Lord Roswaal was prepared to exile me as a punishment. For a moment, I thought that was your whole plan, rather than killing me you just intended to separate me from Sister forever; a fate worse than death. But instead, you defended me.

"For a long time I tried to convince myself that it hadn't happened. That you were playing some kind of 'long con,' as little sense as that would make. The Battle of Arlem made that idea impossible to sustain. You could have killed me that night without any effort at all and no one would have blamed you. My own sister would have agreed that I had been in the wrong if you'd murdered me where I stood. The only conclusion was that you really were a good person and that I'd tried to kill you for no reason," Rem finished.

"The night that Roswaal told me about your Authority, I was certain that I'd been tricked. That you had used your magic to deceive me," Rem said in a flat tone. "I waited until I could excuse myself and then took my mace and followed you up to your room. I intended to kill you."

Subaru's eyes widened and he shared a worried look with Beatrice, "Um. What changed your mind?"

"Once again, you did. I walked into the room and saw you comforting and consoling the little spirit. She offered you a chance to escape. Instead you promised to die at her side rather than abandon her," Rem sighed.

"Subaru..." Emilia whispered.

"Subaru Natsuki, I knew that you weren't a Witch cultist the night I tried to kill you. Over time, I decided that you were a kind and wise man; Someone to be respected, perhaps even admired," Rem said calmly.

Subaru flushed awkwardly.

"I realize now that I was completely wrong," Rem said looking at him impassively.

Subaru blinked.

"You did not spare me because of some deep insight into my character, you let me live because you yourself didn't want to accept the guilt of my death even though I had tried to kill you," Rem said.

"You say that as if it was a bad thing," Subaru replied weakly.

"You promised to die beside Beatrice. You even admitted to the Arlem villagers that this was an act of sheer selfishness on your part. You would rather have died beside her then deal with the guilt of leaving her behind, even if you could have done infinitely more good outside of the Sanctuary," Rem continued matter-of-fact.

"Rem-" Subaru began.

"And now you have been given all the evidence in the world that this witch has twisted your mind and your memories but you refuse to see it. You can't stand the guilt and pain of turning against someone that you think you love, even if a

blind infant could tell that those memories had been implanted by withcraft. You are choosing to run away with this witch out of some romantic fantasy that you can save her. You are a child, Subaru Natsuki: A man who refuses to see the world as it is when it conflicts with his desires," Rem continued calmly.

Subaru scowled, "If you're that certain of all this, then why are you letting us go?"

"Because I can't stop you," Rem said matter-of-fact, "We stand no chance against you alone. Likely we would fail even if we brought every soldier in the camp to face you. Our only option is to find the Sword Saint. Only he can face you and slay the witch," Rem continued, "Beyond that, as little as I like to admit it, I am in your debt for sparing my life and I will see that debt ended."

"I never said that you owed me a debt, Rem," Subaru scowled, "You're the one saying that. But how have you repaid anything? By your own admission, you just saved Felt and Garf's lives not ours."

"I prevented you from having to kill them," Rem said quietly, "I assumed that would still mean something to you. Perhaps I was mistaken."

Subaru shook his head barring his teeth, "What the hell is this? Rem, we have done nothing to you! I did not trick you, I did not deceive you!"

"Nothing to me?!" Rem hissed. She bared her teeth as she marched closer to Subaru. She carried a mace she must have known would be as useless to her in a fight as a feather-duster, "You didn't trick me. You betrayed me! I trusted you! We all trusted you! You betrayed Garf and Felt who would have done *anything* for you! The poor girl was emotionally shattered in your service but you were more concerned with the emotional health of the witch who did the shattering!"

"I risked my life to try to draw the Archbishops away from you and Felt!" Subaru shouted.

"Do not treat me like a child, Subaru Natsuki," Rem hissed with narrowed eyes, "You weren't trying to protect us. You were trying to protect the witch! You would have thrown every single one of us onto the Witch Cult's blades to save 'Emilia.'" She drew back with a disgusted sneer on her face, "Tell me that I'm wrong, Subaru Natsuki."

Subaru's jaw clenched.

She shook her head in disgust, "Poor Garf and Miss Felt. They truly thought you were a hero. They would have done anything for you. You betrayed them. I will never forgive you, Subaru Natsuki. You betrayed all of us. Even those poor spirits who adore you and would die for you without a second thought. Perhaps they will get an opportunity to prove it if your witch decides that their deaths would benefit her."

Subaru glared at her his vision turning red with fury, "Do not push me any further, Rem," He said in a deathly quiet voice.

Rem stared at him her face shifting back to impassive and disdainful. "This is as far as I will go, Subaru Natsuki," Rem said in an expressionless tone, "I owed you a life and my debt is now paid in full. The next time we meet, it shall be with Sir Reinhard at my side and we shall be enemies. He shall slay the witch and free you from this enchantment but that is no credit to you. You are the worst kind of fool, Subaru Natsuki: a powerful one. Fate in its blind ignorance has granted you the ability to do more harm to this world by accident than most men could do on purpose. You will watch as this witch slowly reveals herself to be evil incarnated in human form and I have no doubt that you will still refuse to see it. She will do great wrong to this world and, I am confident that by the time we meet again, I, and your former friends, will be in no mood to show you any quarter. Are we understood?"

Subaru scowled and nodded.

Rem stared at him impassively for a long moment, "You are nothing but a fool, Subaru Natsuki, and you will die a fool's death," Rem said calmly, walking away without looking back.

***Chapter 13*: Chapter 13**

The next morning, Crusch, Felix, Felt, Garfiel, and Rem all sat around the war table in Crusch's command tent.

"Damn it, Rem. Why didn't you fucking tell us?" Garf demanded smashing his fist down on the table.

"We could have brought Subaru home!" Felt yelled.

"I didn't tell you, Garf, because your 'plan' was idiotic," Rem said calmly, "If you had attacked the witch, you would both be dead right now."

Crusch was drumming her fingers on the table, "Your very heroic intentions notwithstanding, Master Garfiel, it is highly unlikely that your proposed course of action would have broken the enchantment this witch has placed on Subaru Natsuki," She said in a conciliatory tone.

Garf folded his arms across his chest with a scowl.

On a personal level, this whole mess might actually benefit me. Subaru Natsuki being captured or ensnared by the witch has got to be damaging to his potential appeal as king, if anyone believed it, that is. My scouts have been tearing the woods apart for days with little sleep and they've turned up nothing.

While the scouts have been scrupulously professional in their debriefings, there is also plenty of grumbling echoing up

from the ranks. The mabeasts in the forests are all stirred up right now, possibly by the Witch Cult deliberately. The scouts are in considerable danger when they go out and they need to search in larger groups than I'd prefer in order to protect themselves. After days of frantic searching with nothing located, the scouts are beginning to wonder if this is some kind of snipe hunt. They've been told that Subaru Natsuki, the newfound hero of the land has been kidnapped by the legendary Witch of Envy, a storybook monster used to make small children behave.

I suppose I wouldn't believe it either.

"Did he give you any indication of where they were going?" Crusch asked Rem.

"I didn't ask," Rem replied carelessly.

Garf and Felt both scowled at her.

Interesting. Garf and Felt are desperate to get Subaru back but the blue haired maid appears happy to be shut of him. Some dissension in the ranks? Subaru's people always seemed fanatically loyal to him. This maid who seems to resent him is an abnormality. Perhaps she could be useful to me.

I wonder why she resents Subaru. She seems angry that he left with the witch but if he was bewitched then he had no choice, did he not? Or... does she doubt he was bewitched? Perhaps she thinks that Subaru Natsuki is working with the witch willingly?

That opens up a whole world of new possibilities and none of them are good.

"Have we received any word from Reinhard?" Crusch asked Felix.

"Nya, the fight is over for the moment. Reinhard and his foe did so much damage to one another that they were both sent flying. Reinhard eventually returned to the battlefield but his foe did not reappear. He's searching for him now but it's been close to two days since the fight ended and not a trace. Reinhard is most unhappy at our lack of success locating Subaru Natsuki. He's threatening to call off the search for the enemy and go look for his master himself if he doesn't pick up some sign of the Archbishop's trail shortly," Felix replied.

"A foe who can fight Reinhard van Astrea to a standstill. Terrifying," Crusch muttered rubbing her face, "Do any of you know anything about this threat?"

"Regulus," Felt and Garfiel said together.

"I'm sorry?" Crusch replied.

"This has to be Regulus," Garfiel grumbled, "The Captain told us about how dangerous and powerful he was."

"Was this one of the Archbishops that Subaru Natsuki believed that he had killed?" Crusch asked.

"Nah. The Captain says that he fought this guy to a standstill and they both wound up having to withdraw," Garfiel explained. "I saw Regulus rip up a whole forest with no effort at all at the Sanctuary and the Captain claimed that he was completely invulnerable to any kind of attack."

"Reinhard related a similar report, nya," Felix said. "He never managed to so much as wound his foe. I did a little digging. Someone matching Regulus's description was reportedly responsible for the destruction of the fortress city of Garkla in Vollachia about fifteen years ago. He slaughtered the entire city, the Vollanchian champion, and thousands of soldiers singlehandedly and emerged without a scratch."

Crusch stared at Felix.

Completely invulnerable to attack? Destroying one of the most fortified cities in the world singlehandedly? What madness is this? And Subaru Natsuki fought a foe to a standstill that Reinhard van Astrea battled for almost two days before the contest resulted in a draw? What does that mean? That Subaru Natsuki is as powerful as Reinhard? More powerful than Reinhard? And perhaps aligned with the Witch of Envy? Could that be why he is so powerful?

Of course! What else could offer Subaru such incredible power? He must have formed an alliance with the Witch of Envy...

Good Gods. What did he promise her in exchange?!

Crusch shook off her reverie and drummed her fingers on the table, "Then it seems we have two problems: The released Witch of Envy and this Regulus person. We need to locate both of them."

"Reinhard has been searching for any trace of Regulus for the past two days but he's found nothing, nya," Felix replied.

Crusch sighed, "Very well, then we must concentrate on Subaru Natsuki and the Witch of Envy. Did any of you get any impression of the witch's goals while she was with you?"

Felt shook her head, "Well, for the most part, we avoided her as much as we could. All she seemed to do was sit there looking sad. The witch seemed willing to do whatever the boss asked without question."

Crusch stared hard at Felt, *Isn't that interesting. Even if Subaru Natsuki was working with her by choice, shouldn't the witch be the one giving orders? If Subaru was the one giving orders...*

Things might be far worse than I dared to imagine.

I better not tip my hand about this yet. This needs to be phrased carefully...

"Alright," Crusch said calmly, "Let's assume that Subaru Natsuki is the one making the plans in their group."

"What?!" Garfiel scoffed.

Crusch spread her hands in a placating gesture, "I am more aware than most of Subaru Natsuki's remarkable intelligence. Perhaps the witch is attempting to leverage this brilliance by allowing him to make the plans for her. She may be using magic to... instill certain desires in him and then just standing back and letting him carry them out."

Felt and Garfiel looked thoughtful while Rem simply stared straight ahead, stone faced.

"I remember that the boss did start talking about 'dragon blood' after we escaped the Sanctuary," Felt remarked.

"Dragon blood?" Crusch replied.

"Yeah, I don't remember him ever bringing it up before but since we left the Sanctuary, he mentioned it several times. He claimed that he had promised to get the dragon blood for the witch but I don't know why," Felt explained.

Crusch got a sinking feeling in her stomach but she pushed it aside, "Interesting but not terribly useful at the moment. I don't think Subaru Natsuki is likely to find a dragon while he's wandering around in the woods. Can anyone think of anything else?"

"The Captain was mostly talking about trying to fix everyone's memories," Garfiel added.

Fix them? Isn't the whole story about memories being modified just a pretext to try to confuse his allies? Why would he be so committed to the notion once it was apparent that no one believed it?

It's a ridiculous strategy anyway. If Subaru simply claimed that the girl was under his control and never mentioned anything about memories being modified, it is more than likely his companions would have believed him. Why even talk about modified memories? It just put the thought into everyone's mind that Subaru had been bewitched and didn't realize it. For a tactician of Subaru Natsuki's caliber, this is a very clumsy mistake.

If nothing else, maybe this is a sign that the witch really did affect Subaru Natsuki's mind. Subaru would almost certainly have a better plan in place even if he was thrown off balance by the Witch Cult's attack at the Sanctuary. However, even if the witch is supremely powerful, maybe she's not all that clever. Maybe she initially made the mistake of using her magic to give Subaru Natsuki a plan to follow instead of setting the goal and letting him develop a strategy on his own.

"Hm," Crusch muttered, "Perhaps we should adjourn for the time being. We have much to think about and we'll doubtlessly all think better on a full stomach. The cooks are already preparing breakfast."

As Crusch expected, the thought of 'food' got Garfiel's immediate attention and he left the tent without comment. Felt followed him but cast a suspicious look back at Crusch.

Crusch opened her mouth to try to speak to Rem but the maid deliberately turned her back on Crusch and left without a word.

"Nya, this is crazy, Crusch," Felix said quietly.

"It might be even worse than we think, Felix," Crusch said staring at the map spread out before her with a dark expression.

"What do you mean?"

"It bothers me that everyone claims the witch is following Subaru's lead," She said.

"But I thought you said-"

"That was just a ruse to keep them quiet," Crusch replied, "If I suggested that Subaru Natsuki was not bewitched but was working with the witch by choice, Felt and Garfiel would have stormed out and left. Worse still, they would have told Reinhard that I couldn't be trusted and he's our only hope against this 'Regulus' if he emerges again."

"I don't get it, nya. Why would Subaru Natsuki be working with the witch? What could she offer him? The throne?" Felix asked.

"No," Crusch shook her head, "He was likely to gain that at a walk all by himself. Subaru Natsuki isn't going to jeopardize a sure thing with an alliance with a witch for something he could accomplish all on his own."

"Then what did he want, nya? Besides, what could he possibly offer the witch to gain her assistance?"

Crusch thought for a moment, "Let's imagine that Subaru somehow made contact with the Witch of Envy. Let's say that he was able to offer to free her from her prison. After four hundred years imprisoned, I'd guess that freedom is what she really wants. What if they signed a contract enforced by magic: Subaru frees the Witch of Envy from her prison and in exchange, she works for him. She uses her magic to make him emperor of the entire world."

Felix's eyes grew wide, "But how could Subaru have possibly set the witch free?"

"Who knows? More to the point, who cares? We know that she's back and wandering the world. How she got out really

isn't relevant right now," Crusch replied.

"If she got free, nya, I'd expect her to immediately kill her ally. Why would she accept being in a servile position to Subaru Natsuki once she didn't need him anymore?" Felix said.

"Perhaps that's part two of her plan," Crusch admitted, "We don't really know anything about their relationship so we can't say for sure what the balance of power is. Maybe things are not as they seem and Subaru is the one following instructions. Maybe their alliance is enforced by magic that neither can break or maybe Subaru is threatening to re-imprison the witch if she disobeys. *Or*," Crusch paused meaningfully, "Maybe she's still too weak."

"Too weak?"

"The ice spell that Felt described, the frost flowers that tried to eat her alive, sounds absolutely horrifying. I shudder to even imagine it. But on the scale of sorcery belonging to world destroying monsters? Those frost flowers are just a parlor trick," Crusch said.

"Maybe she was holding back for some reason," Felix said.

"Maybe," Crusch allowed, "But maybe she wasn't. Maybe what they saw was all that the witch is currently capable of because four hundred years sealed away have caused her magic to wither. Hence the dragon blood."

"I don't understand, nya."

"The dragon blood is reputed to be able to heal any ailment. In extreme cases it's said to be able to restore the dead to life. Do you think it could possibly be used to revivify the powers of an ancient witch?" Crusch asked.

Felix looked horrified.

"If this theory is true," Crusch mused, "Then Subaru Natsuki is not merely a political threat or even a threat to the safety of the nation. He's a threat to the entire world."

"But, Crusch," Felix murmured, "If Subaru needs the dragon blood for the witch to complete their bargain then why is he wandering around in the woods seemingly aimlessly? How does that advance his plan?"

"Perhaps it doesn't," Crusch shrugged, "Remember Felix, no plan long survives contact with the enemy. Even Subaru Natsuki's luck was bound to run out sooner or later. Maybe his plan went awry and he's now attempting to improvise because everything went wrong," Crusch paused, "We don't know very much about the Witch Cult. Few members will surrender even to save their own lives and fewer still will disclose any information about the Cult under questioning or even torture. The little information we have suggests that there is a large schism in the order between those who worship the Witch of Envy and those who fear her. The Witch Cult has been quiet for years but right before the witch reappeared, the Cult showed up in numbers never seen before and armed for battle."

"Perhaps Subaru crossed a line with the Cult when he tried to actually free the witch. Maybe all this fighting is because they're trying to hunt down Subaru and the witch before they get too powerful. The Witch Cult caught all of us by complete surprise so it's not impossible to imagine that they took Subaru off guard as well. Perhaps Subaru wasn't prepared for the Cult to attack the Sanctuary when they did and he had to abandon his original plan and start improvising. On a hunch, he probably wanted to keep the Witch in seclusion, hiding her from the world while she was still weak. The Sanctuary would have been a perfect place to do that. But then the Witch Cult attacked and made that plan impossible so Subaru had to get the witch out of there quickly before the Cult could kill her. Unfortunately this meant that a bunch of people saw her and things spiraled out of Subaru's control."

"Crusch!" Felix gasped, "We need to warn everyone!"

"Warn them of what?" Crusch sighed, "This fever dream of mine? We have no evidence, Felix. Like it or not, Subaru Natsuki is the hero of the land right now. Worse yet, he's my political rival. If I denounce him it will just look like a slander campaign. Any accusation against Subaru Natsuki will need to be supported not just by evidence but by overwhelming evidence. Otherwise it will just look like a desperate, childish attack from a struggling foe. Most of my own officers are profoundly skeptical that the Witch of Envy is free at all, much less that Subaru Natsuki has been kidnapped by her. If I tell them that I suspect he's become her accomplice, they'll call me delusional."

"What if we convinced, Felt, nya? If she denounced him then people would-"

"People would wonder what I gave her to make her betray her lord," Crusch dismissed, "That's all that they would wonder."

"How are we going to get evidence then, nya?"

Crusch rubbed her face, "Let's try to think like him for a moment," Crusch mused, "If I was in Subaru Natsuki's shoes, what would I do next?"

Felix thought about it, "I think I'd use my original plan, nya. I'd try to find a safe place to hide the witch for a while and then come back claiming that I escaped her. Or maybe claim that I'd killed her? I'd look like a hero and the witch could rest in safety until I got the dragon's blood to restore her, nya."

Crusch glanced at Felix, "That is a very shrewd plan, my friend."

"I had a good teacher, Crusch," Felix smiled.

"OK, so assuming that is what Subaru Natsuki does, how can we counter it?" Crusch asked.

Felix looked awkward.

Crusch sighed, "I fear we may be once more out of our depth, Felix."

Late the previous night, Subaru and company had marched south while deep in the woods. They were no longer following the road. Subaru knew that the army was likely to be sweeping through the forest shortly so he urged them all to move quickly and continue on without rest as they hid deep in the forest moving more or less south toward Arlem.

They found a running stream and Emilia and Subaru quickly refilled the water gourds that Rem had placed in their pack.

Subaru heard a growl and quickly glanced up. Across the river were three wolf-like animals with spikes running down their spines and glowing red eyes.

Subaru felt a chill. He'd read about creatures like this: mabeasts. Creatures formed long ago from witchcraft. Creatures that existed to torment and slay living beings.

"Emilia, watch Puck and Beatrice," He muttered slipping Beatrice off his shoulder and stepped forward, placing himself between the mabeasts and his family.

"Subaru, maybe we should get out of here!" Emilia urged.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Hm. Only three. If they live similar to wolves back home that's a very small pack. Scouts? Probably not, wolfs don't usually hunt that way and if they are scouts then why have three traveling together?

Two of them have slight injuries. Have they been fighting? Were they driven out of their pack for some reason? Or did some animal not go down quietly?

Regardless, running is a very bad idea. They have slender lanky bodies. These animals are built for chasing prey and running them down. They really want us to run so they can wear us out and finish us off when we're exhausted. No, against animals like this you take a stand. You ask them if they're willing to bleed for their next meal. Animals that make that calculation will probably back off, especially if they don't outnumber or outweigh their prey.

Subaru restarted time.

"You guys want to start something?!" He yelled stepping forward with a raised fist.

The mabeasts growled but they didn't try to cross the shallow stream. They looked at each other, their canine faces both angry and reluctant.

Subaru was coldly furious. The stress, fear, and exhaustion of the past few days came to a head and he found himself hoping that they *would* try something. *Indomitable* would let him smash the mabeasts easily and he would finally have a foe that he could actually fight instead of one he had to run and hide from. Or one that cut him with words in ways that might never heal.

The mabeasts growled a bit but then they turned and walked away from Subaru, casting him many looks of loathing from burning red eyes. As the distance between them increased the mabeasts went from walking to loping to running and then they disappeared over a hill.

Subaru sighed, uncertain if he was relieved or disappointed, "Alright, let's keep going," He muttered to the others. He lifted Beatrice back onto his shoulder.

"This is an odd place to find wolgarm, in fact. Betty wonders what they were doing here," Beatrice said as they resumed their trek toward the south.

"Why? Is this not wolgarm territory?" Subaru asked. "It seems like they'd do fine in the forest so far from any towns. There should be plenty of animals to eat."

"Mabeasts don't hunt out of hunger, in fact. They are nourished by ambient mana and do not require food. They hunt because they enjoy killing, I suppose. The mana in this forest is very weak. Wolgarm are known to live in areas without strong magic but they make up for the deficit in their diet by killing people and draining their mana. There are no people near this area. If the mabeasts lived here for any length of time then they should starve to death, I suppose."

"Well, they didn't look starving and if they had been starving I don't think they'd have backed down that easily. Maybe they're not from around here?" Subaru asked.

"Hm. Maybe the Witch Cult is using them to hunt us, I suppose," Beatrice muttered.

"Oh no," Emilia whispered.

"I doubt it, Beako," Subaru replied, "If they're scouts then I doubt they'd go off in sets of three. Maybe they were driven out of their territory and are now looking for new homes?"

"Driven out by what, I suppose?"

"I don't know," Subaru shrugged, "There was that huge battle up north. It certainly spooked me, maybe it spooked the mabeasts too. If that battle is still going, or roaming all over the area the mabeasts might have decided to get out of dodge."

Beatrice frowned, "It's possible, I suppose."

"Subaru, if that's true," Emilia frowned, "Then we might run into more mabeasts on our way south."

"Yup. Because that's how our luck goes: anything that can go wrong, will go wrong," Subaru said with a weary laugh.

Subaru was exhausted and his legs felt like rubber but he kept on marching, carrying the spirits on his shoulders.

They marched most of the night only pausing to sleep when clouds swept in from the west, hiding the stars and making it impossible to be certain which way they were going.

The group had collapsed in exhaustion in a glade of soft moss, Beatrice and Puck using Subaru as a pillow while Emilia lay nearby but not so close as to make the spirits uncomfortable.

"Subaru," She whispered quietly staring up at the cloudy sky, "Are you alright?"

He gave a weary chuckle, "I'm pretty tired, Mili," He admitted.

"Me too. But I meant... are you alright after what Rem said to you?"

Subaru glanced at her, "I was actually about to ask you the same question. I mean... you're the one she called a witch."

"And you're the one that she called a betrayer," Emilia replied calmly.

"Wow. We're really nefarious, aren't we? Maybe we should do the whole Bonnie and Clyde thing."

"Who?"

Subaru chuckled, "They're a famous pair of criminals were I come from. A pair of lovers who robbed their way across a nation. They were kind of a romantic icon, I guess. Two people who were absolutely obsessed with one another even though the whole world was against them. I mean, they were really just crooks but people romanticized them and their love story until they became folk heroes," He said quietly so as not to wake the spirits.

"What happened to them?"

Subaru coughed, "Um, I think the law finally caught up with them and killed them."

"Sad," Emilia murmured.

"Yeah, sorry I brought them up," Subaru muttered.

Emilia lay on her back watching the clouds roll by and the stars come out overhead, "Subaru, did what Rem said hurt you?"

Subaru hesitated, "Well, yeah a little. But it also made me pretty angry."

"I can understand that. Rem was doing her best to hurt you."

Subaru was quiet for a moment, "Well, yeah, I was angry at Rem but... I think I was also a little angry at myself. I didn't like the fact that she called me out and I didn't have any real response."

"What do you mean, Subaru?"

Subaru sighed, "Rem accused me of being willing to sacrifice her and the others to protect you."

"It was a horrible thing for her to say; a very cruel lie. I can understand why it would bother you so much."

Subaru opened his mouth and debated his words for a long moment, "...Yeah," He said weakly. He changed the subject, "What about you, Mili? How are you feeling?"

Emilia gave a tired laugh, "Don't worry about me, Subaru. Rem is far from the first person to call me a witch."

"She might be the first person you thought was a friend doing it though," Subaru paused, "Although for some reason I do remember calling you 'Satella' a lot the day we met. Still not sure why I did that."

Emilia giggled and cover her face with her hands, "Oh Gods, I still don't know why I told you that."

"In hindsight, it was kind of funny though," Subaru chuckled, "When I blacked out after Elsa almost sliced me in half, I was worried that I was going to die without knowing the name of the girl I'd died trying to save. That would have been lame."

Emilia didn't respond right away, "Subaru, please stop talking like that."

"I guess you don't see the humor in that situation?"

"Subaru, I have a hard time seeing the humor in *any* situation where you could have died. Especially if it would have been all my fault," She replied.

"If I had died that night, I'm pretty sure we both should have blamed Elsa," Subaru said.

"No, it would have been my fault. You wouldn't even have been there if not for me. You almost died trying to help me," Emilia muttered, "And now everyone is trying to track us down because they think I'm a witch. Even Rem wants you dead."

"For the record, Mili, Rem wants me dead *again*. So really this is just coming full circle for the two of us."

Emilia was quiet for a moment, "Subaru, I keep imagining someone attacking us. The Witch Cult, the Lagunican army, our friends, even just a mob of angry peasants with pitch forks. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you or Puck or Beatrice because of me."

"Nothing is going to happen to us," Subaru scoffed, "We just breezed right through the main army camp! We're running rings around all of our opponents. Sure, all this tromping through the forest isn't exactly fun but we're making do."

Emilia took a deep breath, "Subaru, I think maybe... I should go."

"Go where?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe back to the forest?"

Subaru gave her a warning look, "Emilia, that's one hell of a walk from here and you'd have to go back through the army camp. I don't think you'd have much luck sneaking back on your own," He said in a calm tone.

"Subaru, I'm stronger than you think."

"I know that," Subaru agreed, "That doesn't mean I want you to go off alone when it seems like everyone in the whole world is coming after you. We're staying together because I think it's safer for all of us that way."

She was quiet for a moment, "Subaru, they're only after you and Puck and Beatrice because of me. If I left, you'd all be welcomed back with open arms. I keep imagining something horrible happening to one of you, and it would be all my fault."

Subaru sighed, "Mili, can you please do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"Stop taking credit for what terrible people do!" Subaru snapped.

"What?"

"Look, Mili," Subaru sighed, "Elsa tried to kill me and, yeah I guess she wouldn't have been doing that if I had never met you, but that's what makes *her* trash, not you. You're not responsible for what Elsa did or what anyone else does. The fact that people behave badly when you're around isn't your fault and you don't have to feel guilty for it," Subaru explained.

Emilia paused, "Subaru, do you honestly think that I could watch one of you die and not blame myself?"

Subaru sighed, "No. I guess I'd do the same thing. But you walking away alone isn't the solution. Because if you did sneak off, I would just follow you no matter where the trail led and we'd both be more vulnerable because when we ran into serious trouble we wouldn't be able to deal with it together."

Emilia didn't reply and a few minutes later Subaru fell asleep.

Subaru woke up the next morning and saw Emilia sitting there with her arms wrapped around her knees, staring off into the distance.

Subaru gently shook the spirits awake.

Beatrice yawned, "Betty misses having a bed, I suppose," She muttered.

Subaru kissed the top of her head, "Maybe we could get you a gem like Puck uses," He twitted.

"Good idea! It's actually pretty comfortable once you get used to it, Betty," Puck agreed.

"Betty believes that she will pass," Beatrice grumbled as Subaru took some dried fruit out of the backpack. He ate some and then handed the rest to Emilia.

"It looks like we're running low on food," Emilia murmured.

"Yeah, but I'm hoping to solve that problem today. I think we'll reach Arlem early this afternoon."

"OK, Subaru," Puck asked settling on his shoulder, "What's the plan when we get there?"

Subaru sighed, "Well... honestly, Puck, I'm not sure. We'll need to feel things out. Hopefully we can get a good view of

what's going on down there without revealing ourselves or maybe find a villager we can trust. After that... we'll just have to wing it, I guess."

"Subaru, not to criticize, but I really miss your old plans. They were much better thought out," Puck grumbled.

"Can we stop at the manor on our way," Beatrice asked, "Betty misses her library, I suppose."

Subaru wrapped his arms around her, "I'm sorry, Beako, I just don't think that we can. Fredericka is definitely still at the manor and you know that she'd report us. And that's the best case scenario. Garf and the twins might be there too. Even if Fredericka was alone, she'd rat us out and we'd have an army on our trail in a few days. I think going back to the library is going to have to wait," He said sadly.

Beatrice sighed, "That's fine, I suppose. Betty has her Subaru and her Bubby. Betty can deal with everything else."

"That's my brave girl," Subaru whispered, cuddling her.

The group saw the manor house in the distance around lunch time. Subaru and Emilia ate some more preserved fruit and noted that their bag was almost empty.

They passed the manor house and continued south toward Arlem village, still hiding deep in the woods.

As they approached the village they began to move closer to the road that led between the manor house and the village, hoping to keep their eye on things.

As the village came into sight through the trees, Subaru gestured for quiet, "I heard something," He whispered.

Subaru and Emilia crouched down as Subaru peered through the trees and saw a young girl walking down the road. It was Petra.

"Petra!" Subaru called quietly.

The girl jumped looking around until she caught sight of Subaru waving at her from the bushes.

Petra's face lit up and she was about to cry out when Subaru put a finger to his lips and gestured for her to come closer.

Petra ran over and flung her arms around Subaru's waist with a bright smile.

Subaru heard Beatrice grumbling from his shoulder.

"Subaru!" She cheered quietly, "When did you get back?!"

"Just now, Petra," He said wrapping an arm around her.

She wrinkled her nose, "Subaru, you smell terrible."

He actually laughed, "Yeah, I know. Did everyone get back here from the Sanctuary OK?"

"Not everyone yet, a lot of people are still missing because of the fighting near the Sanctuary and us all getting split up but the chief thinks that everyone got out of the Sanctuary safely at least," Petra replied.

"Well that's good," Subaru replied.

"Subaru, what are-" Petra stopped talking and her face turned white as she looked at something behind him.

Subaru glanced over his shoulder and realized that Petra was staring in open mouth horror at Emilia. Her hood had fallen down and she looked back at the little girl with resignation.

"Subaru!" Petra gasped, "Is that-"

"Petra," Subaru interrupted keeping a firm grip on Petra's shoulder. It wouldn't do for her to run off in a panic right now, "I would like you to meet Emilia. She is a very close friend of mine," Subaru said pulling Petra over closer to Emilia.

"Your... friend?!" Petra squeaked.

"That's right," Subaru said calmly, kneeling down in front of the girl, "Petra, one thing that you're going to have to learn is that very often appearances are misleading. Emilia is a wonderful person even if she looks like someone you've been taught to be afraid of."

Petra looked back and forth between Subaru and Emilia, "Really?"

Subaru nodded, "I've gambled my life on Emilia being trustworthy several times. I haven't regretted it yet."

Petra looked doubtfully at him.

Emilia coughed, "It's very nice to meet you, Petra. My name is Emilia."

Petra didn't answer. She looked back at Subaru uncertainly, "Subaru, are you... sure?"

Subaru sighed, "Petra, I'm not going to tell you that you can trust everyone. We don't live in that kind of world. Some people will trick and betray you as soon as you give them the chance. You can't trust someone you just met. You need to watch them and decide what kind of person they really are but you should *always* give them the chance to prove that they're worthy of your trust."

Petra looked unconvinced and Subaru silently gave up on this plan. He moved onto more important subjects with a sigh, "Petra, there's a reason that we're hiding in the forest right now. I can't get into the details but it's very important that nobody knows that we're here. Have any of my friends come through Arlem in the past few days?"

Petra shook her head, "No. I haven't seen any of them since we left the Sanctuary."

"OK. Petra, I need you to bring the village chief here. I need you to make sure that he's the only one who knows that I'm here. And please don't tell him anything about Emilia. Can you do that for me?" Subaru asked.

"Sure!" Petra nodded, "I'll be right back!"

She took a last confused glance at Emilia and then took off running.

Subaru sighed as she left.

"Subaru, are you sure that involving the chief is a good idea?" Emilia asked.

"No," Subaru admitted.

"Then why didn't we just ask Petra-"

"Because we need supplies, Mili!" Subaru reminded her, "If we asked Petra to grab everything that we need, she'll be punished as a thief."

"Oh. I suppose I hadn't thought of that," Emilia replied.

"Also, Mili, you should probably keep your hood up. Petra's reaction was... less promising than I hoped," He sighed.

"I guess we're not going to bother introducing me in Arlem, then?" Emilia murmured pulling up her hood, "I thought that Petra would believe you if you said the sun would come up in the west tomorrow. But she was still skeptical about me not being a monster."

Subaru sighed.

Fabulous. I brought us on a three day journey south and it looks like it was a massive waste of time. I hope I can get supplies because my only remaining option is to flee over the border. Reinhard is forbidden to cross the border by law and the army doesn't want Emilia badly enough to risk starting a war with Gusteko. I hope.

A few minutes later, Petra returned, physically pulling the village chief along behind her.

"Petra," He said in irritation, "Why did this need to interrupt my lunch? Is this some new game that you're playing?"

"Good afternoon, chief," Subaru called out.

The village chief jumped, "Lord Subaru! Forgive me," He said with a low bow. Petra started at the chief's bow and dropped into a curtsy as well.

"Please don't trouble yourselves. My companions and I are traveling in secret right now. Are you aware of what has been going on since you left the Sanctuary, chief?" Subaru asked.

"We're heard lots of strange and contradictory rumors, my lord. I can't say for certain which ones are true," The chief replied.

"Great. Then you're just about as well informed as anyone else right now," Subaru drawled, "Anyway, my friends and I are in desperate need of supplies before we depart. Do you have any that we could purchase?"

"I wouldn't hear of it, Lord Subaru! You are the savior of your village twice over! Anything you desire shall be yours with my compliments," The chief replied.

Subaru sighed, "I have gold and I do intend to pay fair value, chief. The village needs funds to rebuild after the recent disasters so please do not argue with me on this point," Subaru warned.

The villager chief caught his tone, "Of course, Lord Subaru. What is it that you desire?"

"Are there any earth dragons in the village? A wagon? Or maybe some riding earth dragons?"

"I'm afraid not, my lord. The wagons have all gone away to fetch resources so that we can rebuild our village. If you could wait here for a few days I am certain we could acquire some for you."

"I'm afraid I don't have time for that," Subaru sighed, "Forget it. What we could use is some packs of preserved food. A map of the continent would be wonderful. We also need a few warm hooded robes for traveling in the cold and if you have a tent or something similar, I'd be grateful."

"Of course, Lord Subaru," The chief said, "I will fetch them for you straight away."

"One more thing, chief, it's vital that my companions and I travel in total secrecy right now. I need you to keep our visit strictly confidential," Subaru informed him.

The chief looked confused but bowed his head, "Of course, my lord. You may consider Petra and myself the very souls of discretion."

"Thank you, chief," Subaru replied.

The chief hurried off to gather supplies.

Petra walked up to Subaru, "Subaru, I made you something."

Subaru raised an eyebrow.

Petra took his hand and gently deposited a white cloth handkerchief in his palm.

Petra looked away from Subaru, blushing scarlet, "Miss Fredericka told me that... it's proper for a lady to give a gentleman she cares about a handkerchief before he leaves on a dangerous journey. It will help keep him safe if he keeps it and remembers to return it to her."

Oh man, this has got to be the cutest thing ever. Well, except for the fact that Beatrice's grumbling keeps growing louder the longer Petra is here. Then again that's kind of cute too.

"Thank you so much, Petra," Subaru told her with a smile, "I'll cherish it and make sure to bring it back to you when I return."

Petra's smile was like the sun coming up.

Emilia chuckled quietly from behind them.

Petra turned to look at her and Emilia quickly wiped the grin off her face, looking gravely serious.

Petra approached Emilia who suddenly looked nervous.

Petra stared at Emilia darkly and then handed her something, "Here."

Emilia took the item. It appeared to be a small bracelet made out of beads.

"What is this?" She asked.

"I made it," Petra said awkwardly, "I want you to have it. I... I don't trust you. I don't have any reason to trust you. But if Subaru says you're OK then maybe... maybe I could learn to trust you. Maybe some day we could be friends so... I want you to have it."

Emilia's eyes filled up with tears. She tied the bracelet around her wrist, "Thank you, Petra. I will treasure it always."

Petra smiled awkwardly and stepped away from Emilia to stand next to Subaru again.

The chief returned a moment later carrying two heavy backpacks, two robes, and a bag.

"Here you go my lord," The chief said panting for breath, "Two bags of preserved food, the robes you requested, and my personal tent. It's due to your heroism that I'm now sleeping in my own house instead of in that tent so take it with my gratitude. I also put the map you requested in your food bag."

"Thank you, chief," Subaru said pulling fifty gold coins out of his pouch and handing them to the shocked chief.

"My lord! This is far too much!"

"It's not for the goods," Subaru replied calmly, "You told me those were free. The gold is an investment in rebuilding Arlem. I want the village rebuilt as soon as possible."

I'd like to give him more but we may need gold ourselves the way we're running without any support. I might need to get us situated for the long term somewhere.

The chief had tears in his eyes. He bowed his head, "You humble me, my lord."

Subaru knelt down to look Petra in the eye, "Petra, I need to go now. It's possible that I won't see you again for a while but I'll always think of you very fondly."

Petra bit her lip, her eyes watery, "Take good care of that handkerchief. It will keep you safe." She directed.

"I'll keep it with me always," Subaru promised giving her a tight hug.

Subaru stood up and shook the chief's hand as Emilia started to gather the bags while keeping her hooded face turned away from the chief. Petra helped her with the bags.

"Thank you for your kindness, chief. I depart in good conscience knowing that the people of Arlem are in your hands," Subaru said.

"Thank you, my lord. When you return from your journey, I promise you, the feast will truly be splendid!" The chief

promised.

"I look forward to it," Subaru smiled trying to pull on his new, much heavier backpack without dislodging Beatrice.

Subaru waved goodbye to them and then, hand in hand, Emilia and Subaru walked away into the forest.

The pair walked hand in hand, feeling happier than they had in many days while Beatrice quietly cuddled with Puck on Subaru's shoulder.

Emilia carried the tent bag in one hand while Subaru used his free hand to steady Beatrice on his shoulder.

"Little Petra grows more charming by the day," Emilia commented glancing down at her bracelet. She gave Subaru a smirk, "Do I have competition?"

"Do *I*?" Subaru chuckled, "I saw the look on your face when she gave you that bracelet."

Emilia laughed, "It certainly did put a smile on my face. Petra looked so afraid of me, and then you told her to take a second look and she actually did. It was the best news I've gotten in days."

"She's a good kid," Subaru agreed.

"Betty is thinking that she has heard more than enough about that girl, I suppose," Beatrice grumbled.

Subaru and Emilia both laughed.

"Alright well, we got some supplies," Puck yawned from Beatrice's arms, "So what now?"

Subaru sighed, "I think we may need to go underground for a bit, guys."

"Subaru, you want to live in a cave?" Emilia asked.

"No! I mean, we're going to have to lay low. Keep out of sight for a few weeks, maybe even a few months. Give everyone a chance to calm down," Subaru explained.

"Could this also give Betty and Bubby a chance to rest, in fact?" Beatrice sighed.

"I'm pretty sure we're all desperate for a rest, Beako," Subaru agreed.

"Well, Subaru, we can't just hang out in the woods for months. Our supplies won't last," Puck said.

"No, we are absolutely not going to camp out in the woods for months on end. A few more weeks of this and we'll all be willing to surrender just to get a hot bath," Subaru replied.

"When we use to live in the forest, Puck used to use magic to keep me clean," Emilia mused, "I'd just take all my clothes off and then he'd use a special fire to clean all the dirt and grime off my body without burning my skin."

From his seat in Beatrice's arms, Puck looked at Emilia incredulously, "*What* are you talking about?!"

Subaru glanced at Emilia with a sly smile.

Emilia noticed his expression and looked annoyed, "Subaru! Are you having lewd thoughts about me right now?"

"Oh, yeah!" Subaru cheered.

"Subaru," She sighed, "You are such a child!"

Subaru wrapped his arm around her shoulder and nuzzled her neck for a moment, "But you love me anyway."

Emilia gave him a resigned smile, "You know I do."

The two separated, walking through the woods hand in hand.

"Puck, any chance of a 'fire bath,' or whatever you call it, tonight? Emilia and I both smell pretty funky at the moment," Subaru asked.

"Betty didn't want to say anything, but you absolutely do," Beatrice said.

Subaru chuckled and kissed Beatrice's cheek.

"I don't know, Subaru. I don't know how she knows that I can do that-"

Subaru and Emilia shared an exasperated look.

"-But I don't think it would be a great idea. Betty and I are still exhausted. I spent most of my mana recharging Betty and we're both still pretty weak, especially after healing everyone from the frost flowers and the fight with Ley. We should save our mana for serious problems not 'Subaru and the witch smell bad' problems."

"As always, Puck, you're probably right," Subaru replied.

"My wisdom is both a blessing and a curse," The magical cat replied sagely, licking his paw.

"Well, maybe we can find a lake or a river to bathe in tonight," Subaru suggested to Emilia.

"That would be nice," She agreed.

"Do you think you'd need help any washing your back?" Subaru asked solicitously.

Emilia rolled her eyes heavenward with an exasperated sigh but Subaru saw her hiding a smile.

"Subaru, not to interrupt this fascinating discussion about bathing habits but can we get back to explaining our plan?" Puck asked.

"Oh. Right. So our current problems, in order of danger, are: Reinhard van Astrea, the entire Lagunican army, and the Witch Cult," Subaru said.

"Betty wants someone to explain how we are in so much trouble that the Witch Cult pursuing us is only number three on our list of problems, I suppose," Beatrice muttered.

"Just natural talent I guess, Beako," Subaru chuckled. "Anyway, two out of three of these problems can be solved by us just getting over the border for a while. The closest border is Gusteko so my plan is to head off to the north east and sneak across; hopefully while everyone thinks we're still heading south or hiding around Arlem."

"Subaru, I don't think they like you very much in Gusteko. You killed or captured several of their troops," Emilia said with a worried frown.

"Mili, we're not going to pay them an official state visit," Subaru told her with a pained expression, "We're just a small family on the road. If I remember the map correctly there's a large city not far across the border called Orcos. We still have plenty of gold so we'll go there, find an inn, and just settle in to wait for everything to calm down. We'll start writing letters to Felt and Reinhard explaining the situation and we'll open a dialog with them."

"Do you think they'd really listen?" Emilia asked.

"Sure! One of the reasons that everyone flew off the handle like that was because we were trapped in a war zone and they needed to make snap decisions to protect their lives. Panic is a common reaction to rapidly changing situations, especially if you're worried that said situation involves a world-ending witch. However, as time goes on and things calm down and the world *doesn't* end, Felt and Reinhard will start to become open to the idea that maybe they overreacted. We'll talk it through and once they believe that you're not a threat to me or them, we'll all work together to figure out how to fix everyone's memories," Subaru finished.

"OK, I guess that makes sense," Puck muttered, "How far to Orcos?"

Subaru sighed, "That's the lousy part. If I remember correctly, I think we're talking about at least a six day walk to cross the border and then another day or two to get to the city. And we may have to add more time because the trail will probably get rough and hilly."

"So eight to ten days, I suppose," Beatrice sighed on his shoulder.

"I don't know why you're complaining, Beako," Subaru teased, "I'm the one walking on this trip. You have a nice comfy chair."

Beatrice smirked at him, "Betty likes this chair, I suppose, but Betty would like a nice soft bed even better."

"Oh, yeah," Subaru agreed, "When we finally get someplace safe, I don't think I'm going to want to move from the bed for a month."

"I think that staying in bed that long might get boring pretty quickly, Subaru," Emilia smiled.

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of some way to keep you interested," Subaru smirked at her.

Emilia blushed.

Subaru and his companions made camp that night near a small clear pond.

They were deep in a grassy plain not far from the eastern mountains and they hadn't seen a sign of humanity since leaving Arlem.

It took Emilia and Subaru over an hour to figure out how to pitch the tent and Beatrice's 'constructive' criticism hindered more than it helped.

Eventually they got the tent up and, due to their isolation, Subaru decided to risk making a small fire, relying on the nearby bushes and shrubs to shield the light from anyone's gaze.

Subaru and Beatrice gathered a pile of dried sticks and branches and brought them back to camp.

Subaru piled the kindling together.

"Want me to start the fire?" Puck offered.

Subaru looked up at Emilia who was quietly sitting next to the tent, "You know, Mili, you haven't used your magic since the... frost flower incident."

"Of course not."

"Do you think you could start the fire tonight?" Subaru asked.

"No," She answered flatly.

"Subaru, are you really sure we want to do this?" Puck growled.

Subaru ignored him, "Mili, you realize that you're going to have to use your magic sooner or later, right?"

"I wish that I never had to use it again," Emilia muttered, "I wish that it was all gone."

"That is a very foolish wish, I suppose," Beatrice grumbled. "The elf should try to be useful to Betty's Subaru. If the elf had no magic she'd only be Subaru's baggage on this journey."

Emilia flinched.

"Beako!" Subaru complained.

"If the elf wishes to be less dangerous to others, then she must learn to control and harness her own magic so it only hurts those she wishes to hurt," Beatrice concluded matter-of-fact.

Emilia looked conflicted.

Subaru sighed, "Beako is telling you the truth, Mili, even if she's doing so with all the tact and delicacy of an axe-thrower."

"Hm," Beatrice sniffed.

"We're on the run and people are looking for us with the intent to hurt us. We're going to have to fight sooner or later. You need to learn to control your magic again," Subaru told her.

"I really don't want to have anything more to do with magic, Subaru," Emilia told him.

"Fair enough, I really don't want to have anything else to do with the Witch Cult, but I think that neither one of us is going to get what we want right now," He replied.

Emilia stared at the pile of kindling under a rapidly darkening sky, "What if I lose control of the magic again, Subaru? What if I hurt you again?"

"You won't," Subaru said calmly.

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"The same reason I was sure that you'd pass the Sanctuary trials after Roswaal explained his plan. I knew you loved me too much to fail when I needed you to succeed," Subaru replied.

Emilia stared at Subaru for a long moment.

She extended her hand over the pile of sticks. Her hand was trembling violently.

The spirits were glaring at Emilia; tensing, ready for action.

Subaru reached out and gently placed his own hand over hers, steadying it. "We just need a little flame. A tiny flame. There's nothing to worry about," Subaru encouraged.

Emilia took a deep breath and nodded, "A tiny flame."

Subaru imagined that he could feel the magic flowing out of Emilia's hand and onto the dry wood below. The heat surged and the small pile of sticks burst into flame becoming a respectably large campfire.

Subaru and Emilia both snatched their hands away from the flames quickly and Subaru quickly fed the blaze with larger sticks to keep it going while blowing on his hand.

"Nice job, Emilia," Subaru complimented.

"Yeah, but maybe next time reduce the power you use a little," Puck grumbled.

"Honestly, Puck, I thought I barely used any mana at all," Emilia replied rubbing her singed palm.

"You have an enormous reservoir of magic. A little bit goes a long way," Puck pointed out.

Subaru held his hands up near the fire. The warmth felt wonderful, "Well, this might be the cheeriest night we've spent in days."

"Betty can not believe she is saying this but Betty is looking forward to sleeping in a tent, I suppose. It's much nicer than sleeping on the cold dirty ground," Beatrice said.

"I totally agree, Beako. I think Emilia and I should go wash up at the pond before bed. Do you guys know how to feed the fire while I'm gone?" Subaru asked.

"Betty has never fed a fire before, I suppose. Do fires prefer dried peaches or apples?" Beatrice asked seriously.

Don't you dare, Subaru! Don't you dare laugh! Oh God, I don't know if I can hold it in...

"It's OK, Subaru," Puck replied with a wink, "I'll walk Betty through it."

"Thanks, Puck," Subaru said with a chuckle as he and Emilia walked away from the fire toward the nearby pond with the new clothes from Arlem in hand.

It was too dark to see much of anything, but Emilia taking her clothes off just a few feet away was the the high point of Subaru's past three weeks.

Subaru got naked and quickly waded out into the pond. The pond's bottom was a soft gravel and it was just deep enough to actually swim in.

Subaru tread water for a moment and then sunk under the surface almost with relief. He stayed underwater for a few moments trying to scrub his hair clean with his fingers. Subaru imagined a brown cloud of dirt spreading out from him in the clear water.

When Subaru came up for air he felt clean for the first time in weeks.

Subaru looked around for Emilia and saw her silhouette standing in the shallows, the water only up to her waist.

"Don't go under the water like that!" Emilia scolded him, "I was worried! I thought that something might have grabbed you!"

Subaru glanced around the tiny pond not much bigger than a swimming pool and tried to imagine a crocodile or similar animal living in it.

"Do you want to come for a swim?" Subaru asked treading water.

She shook her head, "Let's just get clean and get back to Puck and Beatrice. I don't have much of an appetite for playing right now," Emilia sighed.

Subaru looked at her with concern and then a wicked smile crept across his face that he quickly concealed.

Emilia blanched as he waded over to her, "Subaru! I know that look! What are you scheming right now?"

"I'm not scheming anything," Subaru assured her in a completely insincere tone as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Subaru!" Emilia said sounding increasingly nervous.

"Oh, don't worry, Mili," He said casually, "I just want to help you get clean!" He said grabbing her legs and sweeping her up in his arms.

"Subaru! What are you doing!" Emilia demanded wrapping her arms around his neck to try and hold onto something.

"I'm just helping you get clean!" Subaru said in an innocent voice walking out into deeper water, "I thought that's what you wanted?"

"Subaru! Don't you dare!" Emilia hissed.

Subaru pressed their lips together.

Emilia stiffened in surprise but then she melted and kissed him back.

It was a long lingering kiss and they both pulled away with regret.

She shook her head, "Subaru, what are you doing?" She asked ruefully.

"I'm helping you get clean," He answered dropping her into the pond.

Emilia got to her feet spitting water and there was roaring fury in her eyes.

Subaru laughed and tried to run away.

"Subaru Natsuki!" She cried out chasing after him, "You get back over here right this instant!"

Subaru hadn't made it very far before Emilia caught up with him. To his surprise Emilia picked him up easily, lifted him high over her head and then flung him out into deep water.

Subaru surfaced chuckling.

"Serves you right!" Emilia sniffed but Subaru heard the smile in her voice.

"Of course, you realize this means war," Subaru said calmly.

Emilia blinked, "What does that-"

Subaru shoved a huge splash of water at Emilia.

"Subaru!" She cried splashing him back.

They played for almost half an hour, dunking and splashing one another, until they were both completely worn out.

Subaru and Emilia were sitting in the shallows by the pond's edge. They were both still naked and sat there with an arm wrapped around each other.

Emilia sighed, "Subaru, that was completely ridiculous! We're on the run for our lives and you wanted to have a splash fight! Are you always going to act like a child?" She said trying to suppress a giggle.

Subaru kissed the top of her head, "Every single opportunity I get!"

Emilia shook her head with a rueful smile, "Subaru, you dummy." Emilia paused, "But I have to admit that... I needed that. I feel better. This whole thing... it's going to be OK, isn't it?"

"Of course it will," Subaru agreed, "The four of us are together. What else do we need? We're going to be fine. We'll get across the border quietly, set up shop in a town and then plan our next move. Hell, maybe we'll really like living up there and we won't even *want* to come back. It's possible."

Emilia chuckled, "If I wanted to be surrounded by ice and snow all the time, I think I'd just go back to the forest," She paused, "Subaru, do you really think that we can find a way to make everyone remember me? As much as I desperately want Puck to remember who I am and what we mean to each other, the bigger problem is that as long as nobody remembers me, they're all going to think that I'm really Satella and keep hunting me down."

Subaru sighed, "I wish to hell that I'd put together what was going on sooner. If I hadn't told people that I brought you out of the tomb, everything might have been different."

Emilia shook her head, "I doubt that, Subaru. The Witch Cult was rampaging through the area so everyone was always going to assume I had something to do with the Cult. And you couldn't have kept their modified memories a secret either because they'd keep referencing things that you didn't know about. There was nothing you could have done."

Subaru chuckled, "When did you get so smart?" He said resting his head against hers.

Emilia giggled, "I've always been smart, you big dummy. You're just finally smart enough to notice!"

"Maybe that's it," Subaru allowed. He sighed with a moody expression on his face, "I can't help but feel that I screwed all of this up. I feel like if I had handled things better, Felt and Garf might have believed me."

"Felt and Garf *wanted* to believe you," Emilia corrected, "When you told them that I was a friend, they were willing to accept that on faith. The problem was me, Subaru. When I cast the... frost flowers, they knew I was too dangerous for them to be near. When you refused to admit that I was a threat, they concluded that I must have bewitched you somehow."

"Emilia, that wasn't your fault," Subaru said.

"This mess is entirely my fault, Subaru," Emilia disagreed, "I completely lost control of my magic and made poor Felt feel like she'd been in a torture chamber. Garf and Felt... came to see me while you were unconscious Subaru. They... Garf was very angry. And poor Felt looked like..." Emilia trailed off and shook her head. "Puck and Beatrice were ready to kill me."

"You were trying to save our lives from Ley," Subaru reminded her, "You didn't know that your magic powers had increase by a factor of ten; hell, maybe a factor of a hundred! Puck suppressed your power to try to protect you and he didn't let you grow up into them properly. Don't get me wrong, I love Puck but the guy is overprotection personified."

"Daddy..." She sighed, "Some days I wish he could take all my magic away from me. Every time that I use it the people around me suffer. First, cursing the forest seals everyone I know in solid ice and now my frost flowers have wounded you and our friends and made the entire kingdom want to hunt us down."

"You're not a quitter, Mili," Subaru reminded her, "We are going to fix this. We will restore everyone's memories. We will help Felt heal from her trauma and we will end the curse on the forest."

Emilia looked at him skeptically, "Subaru, do you have *any* idea how we're going to do those things?"

"Not a one," Subaru admitted, "But, in my defense, I've spent most of the past five or six days fighting to survive and that didn't leave me a lot of time for planning."

I have no idea how to fix any of this. The only possibility I see is to use my Authority. That would be fine except I don't even know how to get started. I wish I'd asked Roswaal a few more questions before he vanished.

Actually, considering how desperate we are, this would be a perfect time for Roswaal to reappear and try to form an alliance. He could demand almost anything and I'd have no choice but to accept. Gee, that's a happy thought, considering what he wanted last time.

So why isn't he doing that? Was he wounded in the fight? Ley implied that he wasn't killed so I assume he got away

safely. Maybe he's hiding out someplace and he doesn't know what's going on? Or maybe he does know what's going on and he's trying to find us but can't. That would be somewhat flattering.

How do the twins factor into this? Rem wants me dead so can I assume that Ram does as well? I was originally planning to keep them both close since I could expect them to be feeding Roswaal information. That way he'd be able to judge when to come back and make his offer. That plan's flown out the window but now that I think about it, maybe it wasn't that a great plan anyway. I'm acting like Roswaal would show up for negotiations but he's just as likely to watch and wait for a situation where we're desperate and try to take Emilia hostage again. It was dumb luck that we escaped his Sanctuary trap. I doubt he'll screw up a second time.

"Subaru," Emilia said startling Subaru out of his reverie, "It's getting late. We should go to bed."

Subaru and Emilia put on new clean clothes with relief. The chief had provided them with hooded robes and these were the first clean clothes either of them had worn in weeks.

Emilia started back toward the fire but she noticed that Subaru wasn't following her. She looked back and saw that Subaru stayed behind to pick up their old clothes.

"Subaru? What are you doing?" Emilia asked.

"Trying to cover our tracks," Subaru explained. "I don't want to leave anything behind that could potentially tell people that the folks here were us instead of some other random group of travelers."

"How would our clothes tell them that?"

"Rem," Subaru answered. "I don't really understand this 'witch miasma' stuff or how it works but yesterday Rem proved that she's able to track us by it pretty easily. If it lingers in the forest maybe it lingers in clothing too. If Rem found this robe or if a scout brought it back to her, she might be able to confirm that it belonged to us and then they'd all know where to search."

Emilia sighed shaking her head, "This whole situation is..."

"Yeah, I get it," Subaru agreed taking her hand as they walked back to the fire.

The spirits there were both pretty sleepy and the fire was dying down.

"You guys ready for bed?" Subaru asked.

"Bubby and Betty have been ready for some time now, I suppose," Beatrice yawned.

"You guys made an awful lot of noise down there at that pond," Puck pointed out. "I know that we're supposed to be alone out here for miles but still, Subaru, you need to remember that we're supposed to be hiding."

"You're right, Puck," Subaru replied, "It was a bad idea."

Subaru opened the tent flap. It was a small tent but Subaru and Emilia could share it easily, especially with the spirits sleeping practically on top of Subaru as usual.

"Mili," Subaru whispered, "Do you think you can put out the fire?"

Emilia bit her lip for a moment but she obligingly held out her hand toward it and the fire quickly faded away.

"Nicely done," Subaru complimented her.

"Much better," Puck agreed, "You're starting to learn to control your magic. Maybe Betty can give you some pointers to make sure you don't let it explode out of you again."

Emilia looked startled at receiving praise from Puck.

"Betty can do that I suppose," Beatrice yawned.

Emilia crawled into the tent and laid down beside Subaru.

"Come on, guys," Subaru whispered and the spirits wearily got up and came over to him.

Puck nestled in Beatrice's arms and Subaru held Beatrice close. He offered the crook of his other arm to Emilia as a pillow and she accepted with a smile.

The spirits seemed to have some misgivings about sleeping so close to Emilia but they didn't say anything.

"Betty misses her book in fact," Beatrice grumbled.

"Yeah," Subaru agreed. He paused, "Beako, why don't I tell you a story from my home?"

"A story from another world?" Beatrice said sounding intrigued.

"Yes. My mother... showed me this story when I was small and I never forgot it. It's actually a story about a mouse named Fivel."

"A real mouse or a mouse demi-human?" Beatrice asked.

Subaru hesitated, "A regular mouse," Subaru explained wondering how that would have affected the story, "Anyway this mouse and his family were living in a country where they were regularly attacked by cats."

"Not sure I'm liking the role felines have in this story," Puck yawned.

"Anyway," Subaru continued, "His family was in danger so they all grouped up and decided to go live in another land where they heard that there were lots of homes to live in, plenty of food for everyone, and most importantly of all, there were no cats."

"Sounds wonderful," Emilia said.

"Hey!" Puck complained.

"Oh, Puck, that wasn't what I meant. But right now being able to escape all our problems sounds like a perfect dream," Emilia replied.

"So his family got on a boat and sailed away to their new country but the boat was caught in a terrible storm and poor Fivel was washed away before anyone could save him. His family thinks that he's dead but Fivel managed to wash up in the new country. He's just a little boy and he has no idea where his family is."

"But at least he's safe in the new country while he looks for them since there aren't any cats," Emilia said.

"Unfortunately, no," Subaru replied, "He discovers that in his new country people are forced into overcrowded living spaces, most are struggling to get enough to eat, and worst of all, the place is full of cats."

Emilia looked horrified.

"Next time can we tell a story where the dogs are the villains, please? I hate those guys," Puck muttered.

"Really?" Subaru asked.

"No, Subaru. I'm just joking. I'm not actually a normal cat," Puck explained patiently.

"What happens to him?" Beatrice asks, "Does he find his family?"

"Eventually. It's a long scary journey for him. He meets people who try to hurt and take advantage of him but he also meets true friends who try to help him. Eventually the mice all get together and come up with a plan."

"They're all going to go back home?" Emilia asked.

"No, that wouldn't help them. They left home to escape the same problems they found here. The same problems exist everywhere and they'll never go away unless someone tries to fix them. So the mice all get together and they build a machine."

"Oh! Betty likes machines! Was it a dragonless carriage?" Beatrice asked.

"No. It was a fire breathing mouse the size of a house," Subaru replied.

Beatrice's jaw dropped.

"The giant machine scares all the cats away and Fivel finds his family and they all live happily ever after," Subaru finished, "Unless you watch the sequel but the less said about that the better," He added.

Puck was snoring quietly against Beatrice's chest. Beatrice's own eyes were closing, "That was an... interesting... story, I suppose. Tell Betty another... story from your world."

Subaru gently kissed Beatrice's head, "Tomorrow, Beako," He whispered as Beatrice nodded off.

Subaru looked at Emilia with heavy eyes. She seemed to be digesting the story, "Subaru, are we doing the right thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's just like you said: the same problems exist everywhere. If we go to Gusteko, isn't it only a matter of time until they accuse me of being a witch as well? Gusteko isn't exactly welcoming to demi-humans."

"I'm not sure that we'll stay in Gusteko for very long. If we decide we need to stay out of Lagunica for a long while, then we'd probably move west to Kararagi. I think we'd do better there. We're headed toward Gusteko right now because it's the closest border and our enemies are surrounding us."

Emilia thought about it, "I guess that there's really no way for us to stay here and fix these problems instead of running away, is there?" Emilia whispered.

"Not right now," Subaru agreed, "Remember, if any one mouse had tried to fight the cats, he would have been lunch. The secret was getting all the mice to unite together to fight the cats."

"What are the cats in this analogy?" Emilia asked, "The Witch cult? The Army?"

"I'd say that at the moment the cats for us are racism and ignorance, things that we've said we wanted to fight almost since we met. Everyone is judging you by your race and your hair. If you were a human, none of this ever would have happened to you and that's wrong," Subaru whispered.

Emilia thought about it for a moment, "I keep fighting with myself about this," Emilia admitted, "Part of me knows that I should be willing to fight for a better life for everyone, not just me, but another part just wants to cut my losses and disappear; find someplace where our little family can be safe and happy and forget about the rest of the world."

Subaru nodded, "We're all exhausted. We're all frustrated and angry. Nobody wants to fight the good fight right now. We need to find our safe place and recover our strength before we could even think of helping anyone else."

Emilia nodded, "Subaru, we should probably go to sleep."

Subaru kissed her gently, "Goodnight, Mili,"

"Goodnight," She gave him a shy smile then closed her eyes and went to sleep cuddled up in the crook of his arm.

Subaru liked the notion of his entire family sleeping this close to him but it was pretty far from comfortable since he couldn't move. He was beginning to wonder if he'd be forced to stay awake all night when his body overruled him and he felt asleep between thoughts.

Two days later, Subaru and company continued to travel north hugging the eastern mountains and passing far to the east of the army camp. This led them through a wide open grassland with little cover but they didn't see any other humans.

What they did see were mabeasts, lots and lots of mabeasts. The mabeasts all seemed to be traveling south east and they were all in a bad mood. However the mabeasts they encountered were all fairly small. While the mabeasts' glares all wished Subaru and company a cruel death, none of them seemed able or willing to deliver on that threat.

Subaru and Emilia had encountered a deep, wide river in a marshy grassland and were searching for a shallow area to ford it.

They had found some promising shallows and were about to cross when a short distance away six mabeasts appeared stood up and rose out of the river. They were huge hulking animals that looked like hippos but twice as tall with rock-like skin.

Subaru swallowed hard. Beatrice tried to slip off his shoulder but Subaru wouldn't let her.

"If they try to attack us, we run," Subaru whispered to Emilia, trying to shield his family.

The enormous beasts glared at the group and made strange growling sounds like a wild boar.

After a long moment the mabeasts turned around and slowly walked away, casting several dark looks back at Subaru.

"Well, that was unexpected," He muttered.

"Why did they walk away?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shook his head, "I don't know but I'm not going to let this go to waste. Let's cross the river and keep going."

Subaru and Emilia crossed the shallows and kept walking across the grasslands. Subaru saw the hippo mabeasts wallowing in a wider part of the river. They were still glaring at him.

"Beako, do you think the mabeasts might be able to sense my Authority and that's why they're backing off?" Subaru asked, "I remember that they were supposedly created by witchcraft so maybe they were designed to be submissive toward Authority holders?"

"Betty doesn't know, I suppose," Beatrice replied, "People can't detect the presence of an Authority but it's not impossible that mabeasts could."

"Hm. Maybe the next time we bump into a mabeast I'll see if I can tell it to roll over," Subaru mused.

"Betty recommends practicing with a small one first, I suppose. Before trying to teach your mabeast to 'shake,' make certain that it can not bite your hand off."

"Your sister is very smart," Emilia said to Puck with a smile.

"Thank you," Subaru and Puck said together.

Emilia laughed.

The sun was starting to set behind the mountains when Subaru heard a bellowing roar.

They all dropped into a crouch and in the distance Subaru saw an enormous mabeast shaped like a chimera: it had a lions head, the body of an enormous goat, and a long tail that looked like a snake. It had large bat-like wings.

The creature was roaring and attempting to seize a group of people that had sought shelter in a small cave. The cave

was too small for the beast but the monster was slowly but surely digging his way inside.

"Beako, what the hell is that thing?" Subaru whispered, irrationally afraid that the creature hundreds of yards off would hear him.

"It's a Guiltylowe, I suppose. The Black King of the Forest. It's terribly dangerous, in fact," Beatrice answered.

Subaru watched the beast drag huge clumps of dirt away from the cave mouth. The people inside were screaming for help.

"Well, it hasn't noticed us yet..." Subaru said in an undecided tone.

"Subaru," Emilia murmured.

He looked at her with resignation.

"We can't just abandon those people," She said simply.

Subaru sighed, "No, I don't suppose we could. And honestly, I'd think less of us if we did."

"Subaru! A Guiltylowe is extremely dangerous!" Beatrice reminded him, "This is not a good time for your 'taming mabeasts' experiment, in fact!"

"Don't worry, Beako. I don't think a Guiltylowe would make a good pet. For one thing, where could we get enough kitty litter?" Subaru muttered.

He watched the creature then triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

The creature is large but also extremely agile and it's clearly powerful going by the way its digging up all that dirt. Your main advantage will come in surprise. When given the opportunity it will leap at you because it sense no threat. You'll get one clean shot at the Guiltylowe then. You should definitely make it count because if the Guiltylowe survives you'll never last thirty seconds to use Indomitable again.

A pretty poor plan to be sure but pretty much the only option. The spirits are still low on their mana and probably can't be of much help and Emilia is just learning to control hers.

Subaru restarted time.

"OK, here's the plan," Subaru said, "We're going to sneak over there," Subaru pointed at a small grove of trees not far from the Guiltylowe. I want the three of you to wait there."

"What?!" Emilia demanded.

"You're all going to wait there," Subaru repeated firmly, "I have a plan."

However, it is a shit plan because those are the only ones I can come up with these days.

"I'm going to approach the Guiltylowe and it should think I'm a helpless easy meal and jump at me. Then I use *Indomitable* to shatter its head."

"Subaru! That's stupid!" Emilia hissed, "Why don't we all fight it together?"

"Because one, if we all attack it won't take the bait and it might go after any one of us, three of whom can not become temporarily indestructible; and two, I don't want those people in the cave to see a silver haired half-elf. I have a nagging suspicion that their gratitude for saving them won't prevent them from reporting you. Let me try to coax it into a rash attack," Subaru explained.

"What if it doesn't work?" Beatrice demanded.

"Then you three will need to conjure up whatever magic you've got and hopefully kill the thing," Subaru said simply, "I'll risk the frost flowers over being that thing's chew toy."

"Subaru, Betty and I are still pretty weak," Puck warned him, "We can probably kill that thing but it won't be a quick fight. We'd have to chip away at it. You wouldn't last long enough for us to do that."

"I know. That's why I'm counting on Mili and her magic if I get into trouble."

"Betty doesn't love this plan, in fact," Beatrice grumbled.

"Don't worry, Beako, Emilia has never let me down yet," Subaru replied.

Emilia swallowed hard.

The four crept over to the grove without the Guiltylowe seeing them. The creature sounded immensely frustrated that digging the people out of the cave was taking so long.

"Alright, you guys wait here. I'm going to try to get close to it before it sees me. Then I'll get my shot. If it doesn't work just throw your magic at it, Mili. I survived the frost flowers before I can do it again," Subaru said calmly.

Emilia looked almost sick.

"OK, wish me luck," Subaru said sneaking off toward the Guiltylowe.

The three watched him go.

"If anything happens to Subaru because you can't control your magic, witch, I just might have to kill you," Puck muttered.

"If anything happens to Subaru because my magic runs wild, Puck, I just might ask you to," Emilia replied watching Subaru intently.

Subaru crept closer and closer to the enormous monster. The creature had to be twelve feet at the shoulder and including its long tail it might have been twenty feet long.

Subaru sneaked close to the monster without issue. This was due less to Subaru's skill at stealth and more to the monster's single minded focus on the cave and its frustration with it.

Subaru had gotten close enough that a rush might have been possible when the Guiltylowe stiffened and sniffed the air.

The monster whirled around and saw Subaru standing there. It let out a savage roar.

Subaru braced himself for a rush but the Guiltylowe stood there, considering.

This thing is intelligent. It recognizes me as food but food that isn't afraid of it. That makes it cautious. That's bad for me.

Rather than run and pounce as Subaru had hoped, the Guiltylowe got low to the ground and slowly crept over toward Subaru growling, apparently waiting to see what he would do.

Subaru took a step closer and the creature froze tensing itself.

It's a cautious hunter. Not sure what something this big could be afraid of, and maybe I don't want to know, but it's not going to make a move until it's sure.

The creature could be all over Subaru in a heartbeat and the stress was intense.

"Go away!" Subaru ordered.

The creatures' glowing red eyes narrowed a bit.

Well, it was worth a try anyway. Apparently my Authority doesn't let me command these things.

Subaru stared into the monster's eyes.

What is this? Is it playing a game or does it really think I might be a threat? Can it sense my Authority? And if it thinks I am a threat, why doesn't it just back off? Is it really too hungry to give up the men in the cave? Or maybe it's just too pissed off.

The tension mounted and Subaru became frustrated.

OK, I can't take this. I need to make something happen here. If I make it happen at least I'm ready for it. If I sit here and wait I'm just giving this thing a chance to catch me off guard.

Subaru took another step toward the Guiltylowe and it sprang at him almost too fast to see.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* just as the beast's jaws closed around his head. It bit down hard but the teeth wouldn't pierce his skin. Subaru drove his fist into the monster's chest and the creature flew upward a good twenty feet, its chest cavity ripped wide open and bits of viscera raining down.

The creature crashed into the earth making no attempt to soften its landing. It was dead.

Subaru let out a huge breath.

I hope I can find another pond to bathe in tonight. That thing's breath smelled like a garbage truck in summer.

"Thank you, stranger. Your action was most heroic. We are all deeply in your debt," A man called emerging from the cave.

A man in full armor.

Shit! Subaru, you fucking idiot! Why didn't you consider this possibility?! That man is wearing Crusch's colors. He's from the army that's searching for you!

Subaru quickly spun away and tried to cover as much of his face with the robe as he could.

"Think nothing of it, young man," Subaru replied trying to make his voice sound old and wheezing.

"Is something wrong, sir?" The man asked. His voice sounded vaguely familiar.

"I'm afraid I have recently come down with a terrible illness," Subaru coughed and crouched down rubbing his chest, "I am attempting to isolate myself so that I don't pass it on to any of my loved ones. Please sir, do not come too close. I would truly lament having given this disease to the country's fighting men."

The soldiers muttered among themselves.

That's right. You don't want an epidemic in camp. Just go away guys, you thanked me, you're done.

"Silence," The leader said firmly.

Oh, fuck! I know that voice. It's Captain Falric! If he sees me I'm toast!

"Grandfather, we are all deeply in your debt. You have saved our lives. To have slain a Guiltylowe single handed is a feat that should be sung in many a hall. You are truly a man of great power! I would invite you back to our base to be honored and rewarded for your valor by the Lady Karnstein. We have extremely capable healers back at our army camp. It would be my pleasure to escort you back there and offer you treatment for this illness," Falric offered.

"I am grateful for your kindness, sir," Subaru wheezed, "But I have lived out in these wilds for a long time and I have no desire to leave them. I am happy to have done you gallant gentlemen a service but now I must suggest you depart quickly. There are more mabeasts in the area and something strange is affecting them. They all appear to be agitated recently. Something has stirred them up. It's dangerous to be out here right now."

Falric paused, "Thank you for your gracious warning, grandfather. However, all the more do I urge you to accept our hospitality. You must be extremely vulnerable out here."

"I'm far from vulnerable, young man," Subaru said coughing again, "I simply came out to try to save your lives. But please depart this place quickly. I might not be able to save them a second time and there are worse creatures out here than the Guiltylowe."

I have no idea if that's true or not. I fervently hope not but it might get them to leave quicker.

Subaru felt a huge shadow fall on him and he looked up he see an enormous bird at least forty feet from wingtip to wingtip with burning red eyes, diving at him with talons outstretched.

Subaru leapt to his feet.

"Stormcrow!" Falric shouted. "Get ready men!"

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* as the bird dove at it him but the bird simply grazed him as it flew by.

Fuck! It saw me fight the Guiltylowe so it's feeling me out before attacking. I just used Indomitable! Thirty seconds before I can use it again.

"Fall back into the trees, men!" Falric shouted, "Let the grandfather handle this monster! He has the power!"

Gee, thanks so much, Falric. Oh well, I guess at least I don't need to worry about you guys now.

Subaru felt someone stepping up next to him, "Grandfather, it will be an honor to fight at your side," Falric proclaimed drawing his sword.

Oh, great. The worst of both worlds.

The enormous bird had made a lazy circle and was now diving at them again full speed.

Shit! It's figured out I can't hurt it! Twenty seconds until Indomitable!

The bird plunged toward him with talons outstretched, each talon was bigger than Subaru.

Falric raised his blade and Subaru prepared for what he knew to be a futile dive for cover.

The bird suddenly lunged forward striking the rock face and falling down in front of the cave.

An enormous icicle at least eight feet long had embedded itself in its back.

The bird staggered to its feet but more icicles pelted the bird. It screamed in agony as the icicles were driven like enormous stakes clear through its body.

The bird was battered by the spell and it crashed against the rock face again and again as it futilely tried to regain its feet and take off.

Finally a large chunk of ice resembling a buzz-saw flung itself at the birds neck neatly decapitating it.

It's body crashed to the ground not far from the Guiltylowe and lay still.

Subaru looked up and saw Emilia standing there surrounded by the spirits. Her hood was thrown back and her silver hair fairly glowed in the dim light. Her entire body was luminous, the magic surging through her making her glow like a radiant star.

Oh my God... She looks like an angel. A goddess. If somebody set up an altar, I'd bow down!

Then Subaru noticed the large patch of frost that Emilia was standing in and the delicate frost flowers growing inside.

Shit! ...OK, I guess those flowers are still a trigger for me. Fuck. Well, at least the frost isn't coming close to anyone so the flowers won't hurt anybody.

Alright, Emilia still has some issues to resolve with her magic but being able to control that much power sure seems like good progress!

"It's the witch!" Falric cried out, "To arms, men!"

Shit! Subaru thought rushing back over to Emilia's side in order to protect her and the spirits.

"Grandfather! Get away from-" Falric stared at him for a long moment, "Lord Subaru?!"

Shit, again! Subaru realized that his hood had fallen back during his frantic rush to Emilia. He started to pull it up then let it go as pointless.

Subaru sighed, "Hey Falric, how have you been?"

Falric stared at him, "Lord Subaru, do you realize who this is?!"

"This is Emilia, Puck, and Beatrice. They are my family," Subaru replied.

"Subaru, this is Satella the Witch of Envy and you have been bewitched by this woman! You must come-"

"Falric, I have in no way been bewitched and I have prior obligations so I will not be going with you. Incidentally, this 'witch' did just save your lives which might be something for you to think about," Subaru said flatly.

Falric hesitated for a moment, "Lord Subaru, I," He shook his head clearing his thoughts, "I have strict orders to kill this witch!"

Emilia took a step back but Subaru didn't budge.

"You will die trying," Subaru warned him folding his arms, "You have no chance against us. None whatsoever. Surely you all can see that?"

"Lord Subaru," Falric gasped, "Would you truly-"

"Anyone who seeks to bring harm to Emilia is my enemy. It's just that simple. Attack her and you *will* die," Subaru said simply, "You are a man who cares about the soldiers under his command, Captain Falric. I saw that time and time again during the Whale Hunt. You are not a man who will blindly follow orders that force his troops into a meat grinder for no true reason. I think I know Crusch Karnstein pretty well. She'd much rather you all go back and report that you saw us, that's valuable intelligence after all, rather than you all die here pointlessly."

Falric digested that, "Lord Subaru, am I to understand that you're letting us go?"

Subaru sighed, "Yes," He said, "I won't cross the line into butchering good men that I have no quarrel with. You will return to Crusch and you will report to her that you saw us. That's just how things will be," He said ruefully.

Falric stared at Subaru, "Lord Subaru, I am in your debt and not for the first time today but I implore you not to be fooled into giving the dragon blood to this witch!"

"The dragon blood?" Subaru echoed in surprise, "Why? What's so bad about giving Emilia that?"

"The dragon blood will restore the witch's true power! She'll be able to end the world completely this time! Lord Subaru, she must not acquire it!" Falric said.

Puck drew in a hissing breath, "Is that why you wanted the blood?!" He demanded.

"Puck!" Emilia snapped. For the first time that Subaru could recall, Emilia looked truly angry with Puck, "Even if the blood could make my magic stronger, why would I want it? My magic has brought nothing into my life but misery. If Subaru offered me a potion that could remove my magic forever, I'd drink it without a second thought!"

Puck blinked in surprise.

Falric stared at Subaru's family in confusion.

"Look Falric, it doesn't matter anyway. The blood is all gone. I couldn't give it to Emilia if I wanted to," Subaru sighed.

"Gone?"

"All gone," Subaru replied, "Otherwise they would have used it to heal the king and his family. Unless I want to go dragon hunting, and no I don't particularly want to do that, I'm not getting any more blood so you don't need to worry about it."

Falric didn't reply.

Subaru sighed, "Look, we're not going to come to an agreement so we might as well just go our separate ways. However I'd like you to deliver two messages when you return to the camp."

"Very well," Falric said in a cautious voice.

"During your report, please make it a point to tell Crusch Karnstein that your lives were saved by 'the witch,'" Suabru said pointedly.

Falric looked awkward but he nodded.

"Also, please tell Miss Felt that I am truly sorry for everything that has happened to her. She's right, it was all my fault. She needed me and I was too distracted by other people's problems to help her. I can't do anything about it right now but I promise I'll try to find a way to make it up to her," Subaru whispered looking away in shame.

Falric stared at Subaru then hurriedly nodded.

Subaru sighed, "Alright, then we have come to the parting of the ways. I don't really care which way you go, but don't try to follow us."

Falric nodded.

Subaru put Beatrice on his shoulder and took Emilia's hand. They passed the soldiers and continued moving to the northwest. The soldiers watched them until they were out of sight.

Subaru waited until the soldiers were far out of sight and then changed course. If he kept going this way he'd probably wind up back at the army camp. He'd only gone this way to mislead the soldiers. Rather than going north toward Gusteko, Subaru swung north east hoping to get out of the likely search area as quickly as possible before marking a dash for the safety of the border.

"You really were amazing back there, Mili," Subaru told her.

"You think so?" She smiled.

"I don't think you've ever used that much magic before *and* you kept control of it. Also, you looked amazing! You were glowing like a star!" Subaru cheered.

Emilia shook her head with a laugh.

"I'm really proud of you, Mili," Subaru said, "I know you didn't want to use magic but you did and you saved a lot of lives."

"Like you said, when someone you love needs you to succeed, failing isn't an option," She said proudly.

"Oh, does that really work?" Subaru asked, "I thought I was just bullshitting you."

Emilia scowled at him, "Subaru, I *will* hit you," She warned, "Actually, I will hit you twice just so I know that *Indomitable* is off for one of them!"

"Something tells me I should consider that a legitimate threat," Subaru mused.

Emilia snorted looking annoyed at him but Subaru saw a smile in her eyes.

"Yeah," Puck murmured, "You used a lot of magic and you mostly kept control of it. It was... impressive."

Emilia's face lit up, "Thank you, Puck!"

"I was scared that the Stormcrow was going to hurt Subaru. I knew that Betty and I didn't have enough mana to stop it," Puck added, "If you hadn't killed the Stormcrow, Subaru might have been badly hurt so... thank you, Emilia."

Emilia smiled and her eyes became watery.

"OK guys, this is going to be a long night," Subaru apologized, "I doubt that Crusch will send out search parties this late in the day but we need to be miles and miles from here by morning."

"I can go as long as you can, Subaru," Emilia promised.

"Great, then we just need to worry about how far I can go at this point!" Subaru snickered.

Subaru glanced at Beatrice and Puck sympathetically. They were clearly exhausted.

Subaru took Beatrice off his shoulder and cradled her against his chest.

"What's all this about, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

Subaru kissed the top of her head, "Emilia and I need to walk but you and Puck are tired. So try and get some sleep if you can," He said cradling the spirit as he walked.

Beatrice yawned, "Beatrice isn't sleepy yet, in fact," She said as Puck drifted down into her arms and cuddled against her.

"I know," Subaru said keeping the smile out of his voice.

A moment later Beatrice's face pressed against his shoulder and she began to gently snore.

Subaru smiled down at the sleeping spirits, "They're so cute," He mouthed to Emilia.

Emilia smiled back.

"Well, it looks like Puck is finally warming up to you," Subaru commented.

Emilia had a broad smile even though her face was wet with tears, "I know that it's going to take a long time for Daddy and Beatrice to learn to trust me."

"We have all the time we need for that," Subaru shrugged. "We either undo whatever this is and they'll both remember you, or they'll just spend some time with you and realize what a wonderful person you are."

Emilia chuckled, "It's really hard being around Puck when he wants you dead."

"Oh, cry on my shoulder!" Subaru snorted, "Do you have any idea all the crap that Puck did to me when we met? He threatened to kill me the moment we met!"

"He did not!" Emilia protested, "You just passed out."

"He absolutely did! He knocked me out and then as soon as I woke up he told me that I had better behave myself cause next time he wouldn't let me wake up!"

Emilia looked shocked, "Why would Puck do that?"

Subaru coughed, "Um. There's just the slightest possibility that I was having... inappropriate thoughts about his daughter."

Emilia gave him an annoyed look.

"What?! It was love at first sight," Subaru protested.

"No, that was lust at first sight," Emilia corrected. "It serves you right. You're just lucky I love you or I wouldn't have the patience to put up with all of these lewd comments of yours."

Emilia realized that Subaru was grinning at her.

"What now, Subaru?" Emilia said rolling her eyes.

"Nothing," Subaru replied. "It's just that you just said you love me."

"I've said that lots of times, Subaru."

"And it always makes me smile," Subaru replied.

Emilia smiled back at him and took his hand.

"Subaru," Emilia murmured, "When did you and Puck start to get along better? Was it when we got engaged?"

"No. That made us get along *much* worse," Subaru replied. "Honestly, I thought he was going to kill me the moment we told him about that."

"Then what did it?"

"Well, a couple of days after we got engaged I went to talk to him. You'd gotten pretty sad about all the fighting that we were doing so I decided to go and try to make peace him. He was pretty annoyed at me at first but after a while I convinced him that my goal was to make you as happy as I possibly could. I convinced him that I didn't want to take you away from him because I knew that Subaru and Puck would make Mili happier than just Subaru could. He thought it over and he finally decided to accept me."

Emilia stared at him, "You never told me about that."

Subaru shrugged, "Well. It was... I don't know. I guess it was a special moment between the men in your family, if that makes any sense."

Emilia looked off in the distance, deep in thought.

The two walked hand in hand long into the night.

"How much further before we reach the border, do you think?" Emilia asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. Three days at least. If we keep going this way we should reach the King's Highway and that leads up into Gusteko. Maybe if we're lucky we can pay someone to give us a lift," Subaru said.

"Oh, that sounds heavenly," Emilia sighed.

"Yeah. If we walk most of the night I think we can reach the highway by morning. Then we can try to bum a ride and sleep on the wagon," Subaru said.

"Will people be willing to take us?" Emilia asked.

"For a few gold coins? I think so. You'll probably want to keep your hood up though," Subaru said ruefully.

Emilia sighed.

"I'm sorry, Emilia," Subaru said helplessly, "I wish I could do something about all this."

"What? Subaru, you're doing everything you possibly can," Emilia replied.

"No, I mean... the prejudice. The way people look at you and think 'witch.' It's not fair. I know you talked a lot about demi-human rights and the abuses they suffer but... I guess I never realized how bad it was until this happened," Subaru sighed.

Emilia shrugged and gave Subaru a half smile, "I'm used to it."

"Yeah, and that's another tragedy," Subaru replied.

They walked in silence for a moment.

"It might be even worse in Gusteko," Emilia commented, "I should probably stay in hiding while we're there."

"Well, we'll all be in hiding while we're in Gusteko to some extent. But yeah, you should probably stay out of sight as much as possible. If we don't think we can come back to Lagunica for a while, then we should probably buy a wagon and go to Kararagi. I think you could expect better treatment there."

"Maybe," Emilia replied, "Kararagi is friendlier to demi-humans on the whole but no matter where we go I don't think I'll be very welcome."

Subaru sighed, "I wonder if there's any way to bring us back to my world."

"Do they not have witches where you come from?" Emilia asked.

"Hm. You know it suddenly occurs to me that I never told you much of anything about my world," Subaru replied.

"I suppose I never really asked," Emilia shrugged apologetically.

"Well, in my world, there are no demi-humans, no magic, and no spirits," Subaru said.

Emilia stopped in her tracks looking at Subaru in shock.

Subaru gave her a tired smile, "I'm not playing a prank on you. My world doesn't have any of these things. Where I come from, all of these things are storybook fantasies," Subaru sighed, "I remember I told Beako once that I need to remember to be more grateful to be here. Even in this mess..."

Emilia started walking again, "I can't even imagine a world like that. What's wrong with your world that it doesn't have any magic?"

"No clue," Subaru replied, "There's plenty of shit wrong with it but I don't think most people would claim that 'no magic' is particularly high on the list."

"They don't miss it?"

"Well... they don't really *know* it. Like I said magic and elves and things are only known from books and people's imagination back home. They can't miss something that they never knew," Subaru replied.

Emilia looked off in the distance thoughtfully, "I know that I said I'd love to be rid of my magic, and I meant it, but a whole world with no magic just sounds wrong. It feels like something is missing there. Like something is broken."

Subaru shrugged, "I don't know. I've only ever seen two worlds. One has magic and one doesn't so your guess is as good as mine as to which world is 'normal.'"

Emilia thought for a moment, "Subaru, how do you think I'd fit in on your world?"

Subaru laughed, "I don't know why you're asking me. I never fit in there!"

"I was just wondering."

"Well, you'd be the only elf in the world which might make fitting in difficult," Subaru admitted, "On the other hand you'd unquestionably be the most beautiful woman on the planet so me trying to keep all the other guys away from you might end up being a full time job."

"Subaru, quit teasing me," Emilia complained.

"I'm not! You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen! If I brought you home you'd redefine the standard of beauty for an entire planet!"

Emilia stared at him, "Subaru. You're not joking, are you? You really believe that."

"Yes, in the same way that I believe that fire is hot, rivers are wet, and that Garf isn't too bright," Subaru replied.

"Subaru," Emilia muttered reproachfully.

"Oh, come on, Mili. We're on the run from whole kingdoms right now. We need to take our laughs where we can get them," Subaru said.

Emilia looked off in the distance.

"Subaru, do you really think we'll be safe in Gusteko?" She asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what's stopping everyone from following us there?" Emilia asked.

"Well, if the Lagunican army comes after us in Gusteko, that's called an invasion and I don't think the locals would be amused," Subaru chuckled, "Reinhard isn't allowed to cross the border by law so really the only people we'd need to worry about finding us is the Witch Cult. That's still a big problem but it's one problem instead of three. I suppose Felt, Garfiel and maybe the twins might come looking for us, but I think that they'd come looking for a parley not a fight. Alone, their odds against us aren't very good."

"But what if Lagunica just tells Gusteko that the Witch of Envy is wandering around in their kingdom? Wouldn't they try to hunt me down too?"

"Maybe," Subaru admitted, "They might also think that it's a trick or some kind of practical joke. Besides, once we cross the border our trail should go cold so even if they do tell... whoever runs Gusteko about us being there, they'll have no idea where we are or where to start looking for us. I'm not saying that we can stay in Gusteko long term but we all need a break. Even a couple of days to rest and recover would do us a world of good. If we detect that the wind is shifting against us, we'll get out of there before the heat comes down. We should have plenty of time to come up with exit strategies."

Emilia shook her head, "Subaru, how do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"How do you come up with all these plans? If you weren't here, I don't know what I would have done. I'd probably have tried to go back to Elicor, gotten lost, and ended up wandering around in circles until I got caught," She sighed.

"Err, I think maybe you're giving yourself too little credit, Mili. I think if you were in that situation you'd surprise yourself. You certainly surprised everyone at the Sanctuary," Subaru said.

"After you got there," She pointed out.

"Hey all I did was provide some extra motivation to complete the trails. You did the work all on your own," Subaru said.

"No, it was you, Subaru. You showed me how to beat the trial."

"I did?" He asked in confusion

She smiled at him, "Yes, you did."

Subaru scratched his head, "Umm, how exactly did I do that?"

Emilia laughed, "Maybe I'll tell you someday. I like it when you feel confused."

"No wonder you like me so much then," Subaru chuckled.

That evening, Crusch stood over the map in her command tent. It was marked with numerous pins connected by a thin red string.

Felix stood next to her. Felt and Garfiel stood on the other side of the table.

"Alright," Crusch murmured, "Let's go over this one more time. Subaru and the witch left the trailer here and headed off to the north west when last you saw them," Crusch pointed at a yellow pin in the map.

"Yeah," Felt agreed.

Crusch looked at the map, "Assuming he kept going in that direction he would have reached Miseri in a couple of days. Could the witch have had some reason to go to Miseri?"

Felt shrugged, "I guess so but if she did, she picked a weird time to sneak off. We passed way closer to Miseri a day earlier."

"Well," Garfiel scratched his chin, "Maybe it was like Marty and Emmett after the lightning struck."

Crusch stared at him, *What is this buffoon talking about now?!*

"Translation, Garf," Felt sighed, "We didn't all grow up reading those weird books in the Sanctuary you keep talking about."

"You know, maybe the witch needed to go someplace really badly but Subaru was unconscious after the fight with Ley and the frost flowers."

Felt shuddered.

"And that meant that she couldn't leave until Subaru woke up," Garfiel finished.

Crusch mulled that over, "Possibly," She admitted.

"Hey, what's this pin?" Garfiel asked pointing at a red pin to the northwest.

"That's where Reinhard fought Regulus the other day, nya," Felix replied, "Currently the site of a very large crater. The blue pins nearby are where Reinhard searched for him after the fight but he didn't find anything."

"So," Crusch continued, "After the fight, Reinhard van Astrea searched all across the north for Regulus and for Subaru Natsuki," Crusch pointed at a forest of blue pins between the trailer, Miseri and Priestella.

"And he found nothing," Felt added, "The next day Subaru and the witch manage to sneak through this whole frigging army camp undetected. We wouldn't know about it at all except that Rem told us that she smelled a cultist."

Felix raised his hand, "Question: if Rem had no intention of letting you confront Subaru Natsuki and his witch, then why did she tell you about smelling the witch in the first place, nya?"

Garfiel growled.

"Apparently, Rem wasn't sure at first," Felt grumbled folding her arms, "Originally, Rem thought it was a witch cult spy. It wasn't until we had found the cave that she told us that it smelled like Su... the witch."

"Anyway," Crusch sighed, "We inform Reinhard of this incident and he travels down south to search," Crusch taps the map at a group of blue pins in the north Kremaldy forest.

"And then, three days ago," Felt added, "Reinhard passes through Arlem to check on everybody and Petra told him that Subaru and the witch had been there."

"Although apparently, this 'Petra' had been warned by Subaru not to reveal this information," Crusch muttered, "I don't like faithless people."

"Whose side are you on, Crusch?!" Felt objected. "Besides, it's not her fault. She's a child! She knows that Red is Subaru's best friend and a hero besides! He said he was trying to rescue him and she took him at his word!"

Crusch shook her head, "Well, whatever the reason, now we know that Subaru headed further south so Reinhard investigated there and I repositioned my scouts," Crusch grumbled pointing at a swarm of blue pins between Arlem and Costuul and around the surrounding mountains.

"Then last night, Captain Falric and his troops were investigating the mabeast disturbances in the area. He's attacked by a Guiltylowe and trapped in a cave. He and his men almost die but Subaru Natsuki rescues him and kills the Guiltylowe with a single blow."

"That's our Captain," Garfiel chuckled.

Crusch glared at him, "Then," She continued, "A Stormcrow attacks them and the witch intervenes, killing the beast."

"Do different kinds of mabeasts usually hunt together like that?" Felt asked.

"Nya, Stormcrows don't hunt with other mabeasts. They try to poach their kills," Felix explained, "The Stormcrow probably wondered what the Guiltylowe was so interested in inside that cave so it waited for the mabeast to dig it out and then planned to steal it."

"In any event," Crusch said, "Subaru tells Falric that the dragon blood is all gone, which is a ridiculous statement."

"Actually, he told me the same thing," Felt murmured.

"What?" Crusch asked.

"He told me that the blood was all gone and he seemed pretty upset about it," Felt explained.

"Yeah, Capella told him that during the fight," Garfiel elaborated, "The Captain looked shocked. The bitch told him about the blood like she thought it would break him and it looked like maybe it did but I don't know why."

Crusch's mind spun. *The blood is gone... What does that mean? Didn't the royal family get more blood from the dragon regularly as part of the pact? How could the Kingdom have run out of blood like this? And couldn't Subaru Natsuki just get more blood once he becomes King?*

Crusch shook off the questions. They weren't relevant right now.

"Finally, Captain Falric reported that Subaru was deep enough under the witch's spell to offer violence against anyone attempting to harm her. Falric last saw Subaru headed back toward the northwest," Crusch finished pointing at a red pin.

Felix studied the map, "If he kept going that way he'd miss our camp and eventually get to Miseri, nya."

"Possibly," Crusch sighed, "He might also have changed direction as soon as he was out of sight so that Falric wouldn't know which way he was going."

Felix pushed blue pins into the area near the latest red pin, "Scouts have been dispatched to the surrounding area, fifteen miles in every direction. However the swampy grasslands are bad terrain for riding earth dragons so our scouts are on foot and the grasslands also make for bad tracking. The area is too wet and green to have many marks of their passing. The scouts haven't come up with anything yet. Reinhard should return soon and we can brief him on the new information, nya" Felix said.

Crusch slammed her fist into the map, "Damn you, Subaru Natsuki. What are you planning?" She whispered.

"Don't you mean what is *the witch* planning?" Felt asked with an edge in her voice.

"Yes, of course," Crusch replied in a repentant tone, "I did indeed misspeak."

Felt glared at her suspiciously.

"Hey, what *does* the witch want anyway?" Garfiel mused.

"What do you mean?" Felt asked.

"Well, what is she trying to do? The witch is just wandering aimlessly in the woods as far as I can tell. The only time she pokes her head out it's to rescue somebody from a mabeast. Maybe... maybe she's not as bad as we thought," Garfiel suggested diffidently.

"Garf!" Felt yelled in exasperation.

"I'm just saying, shrimp!" Garfiel held up his hands in surrender, "Falric says that the Captain convinced her to save his men's lives. Maybe the Captain can control her."

"Garf, listen! I know that you're stupid. Frankly that's one of the only endearing things about you but this is dumb even by your standards. The witch has Subaru under a spell that dominates his mind and twists his memories! Who do you think is controlling whom? On top of that, do you remember what she did to us?!" Felt demanded.

"Of course I remember! I was there too! But the flowers that attacked you also attacked the Captain and the witch seems to care about what happens to him if nothing else!" Garfiel said helplessly.

"What are you saying?" Crusch asked.

"I'm just saying, maybe the witch was telling the truth, you know? Maybe the frost flowers were an accident and the spell just got out of control when she tried to save us from Ley," Garfiel shrugged.

"And what? That just makes it OK?!" Felt demanded.

"Shrimp, I'm not saying that! Look, all I'm saying is that... if the Captain can make her behave herself, then maybe we can negotiate with her... with him. Convince the Captain to come in out of the woods and then we could all solve the problem together," Garfiel shrugged.

"Garf! Subaru is freaking enchanted by the witch! He's her puppet and will probably say whatever she wants him to say!" Felt glared at him and Garfiel shrank in on himself.

Garfiel looked hurt, "So, what then?! If the Captain *isn't* the one calling the shots then explain what happened to Falric. The *evil witch* made the decision to rescue those soldiers?!" Garfiel demanded.

Crusch looked at him coldly, *Garfiel's loyalties are impressive. Normally I would respect that but Garfiel's dedication to Subaru goes beyond the point of reason. If Subaru says the Witch of Envy is under his control, then Garfiel seems to be willing to take his word for it. Then again, the even more concerning possibility is that Subaru's statement might not be a lie. I need to make sure that Garfiel doesn't go off looking for Subaru alone. If he met his 'Captain' without Felt there to hold his leash, I'm worried that Subaru Natsuki could convince him to switch sides.*

"Before we can do anything, we need to find them," Crusch said in a conciliatory tone, "My scouts are in the field. Hopefully they can pick up the trail. We'll brief Reinhard as soon as he gets back."

"We can't keep using Red this way, Crusch, " Felt complained, "He's barely sleeping! The poor kid is going to burn out!"

"This is an emergency, Felt," Crusch replied, "We need to get control of this situation before the witch regains her power."

Felt glowered at Crusch but didn't respond.

Crusch sighed, "It's getting late. We'll all think better in the morning."

Felt nodded and left the command tent with Garfiel and headed back to their own tent, now with only two sleeping rolls inside.

They both sat down on their rolls with a sigh.

"I think Crusch is losing it," Garfiel confessed, "What kind of evil witch goes skipping through the country side doing good deeds? What kind of evil witch rescues soldiers from mabeasts?"

"Fleabag, will you please stop talking about the witch like she's the good guy? It drives me crazy!" Felt growled.

"I'm just repeating what actually happened, shrimp!" Garfiel snapped back.

"The witch completely rewrote Subaru's memories! What kind of 'good witch' does that?" Felt demanded.

"What if the Captain was right? What if it's all of our memories that got warped and his Authority thingy protected him?" Garfiel asked.

"Oh Gods," Felt said covering her face with a bitter laugh, "Do you really admire him *that* much, kid? If he told you that you could fly by flapping your arms really hard would you believe him?"

"You know, what? Fuck you, shrimp!" Garfiel snapped.

"*Nobody* remembers the stuff he talked about. Not us, not the twins, not even Crusch who on the other fucking side of the kingdom when we found the witch. If Subaru was right then there is some kind of ridiculous magic that modifies the memories of *everyone* in the fucking world except for him. So you tell me, how likely is that?" Felt asked him with an exasperated sigh.

"I don't know!" Garfiel spat, "I'm just saying, if this witch is so evil then why is she devoting so much time and effort to doing good things?"

"So that idiots like *you*, fleabag, will do exactly what you're doing!" Felt snapped, "She wants us to think that she's OK so that we'll lower our guard and stop chasing her! Then she has all the time in world to use Subaru to carry out her plan!"

"Yeah, what plan is that again? Cause it seems like all the witch is doing is following the Captain around the woods," Garfiel said sarcastically, "You keep talking about the evil witch and her evil plan but it doesn't seem to me like you have any idea what that plan is-except for the fact that it's evil. You're obviously very clear on that point."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Felt demanded.

Garfiel stared at Felt and then took a deep breath, "I've been thinking-"

"Oh man, Garf's been thinking. I'm sorry that Ram isn't here to see this," Felt snorted.

Garfiel glowered at her, "I've been *thinking* that maybe you're not seeing things clearly anymore, Felt" He suggested quietly.

"Excuse me?!" Felt gaped at him.

Garfiel sighed, "Look! You're not acting like the Felt I know. You're not using that enormous brain of yours to view the situation objectively. This whole thing has gotten personal for you."

"You're goddamn right it's personal!" Felt shouted, "The witch tortured me, kidnapped Subaru, and is now doing who knows what to him!"

"That's the problem, Felt! She didn't kidnap him! *He* decided to leave with her and she followed *him*. We've got no evidence that she's doing anything to him at all. If anything the reports seem to indicate that she's following his lead, the same as she did when we were in the trailer!" Garfiel yelled back, "You've lost perspective, Felt, and you're not thinking clearly. You're frustrated, angry, and exhausted! You've barely slept in three days! You need to get some fucking sleep and take a fresh look at things."

"I can't sleep, you enormous blond prick!" Felt screamed.

Garfiel blinked. He was used to having screaming arguments with Felt. They were all in good fun. But now that he looked closely at Felt, he saw her big red eyes were filled with tears.

Felt bit her lip, "I can't close my eyes, Garf. Every time I try, I feel those horrible flowers creeping all over me, turning my body into a briar patch as they eat me alive. I'm not sleeping because I fucking can't! Every time I try to close my eyes I just want to start screaming!" She shook her head. "Felix says there's nothing more he can do for me. Physically I'm fine but the nightmares..."

Felt wrapped her arms around her body, trembling. She took a ragged breath.

Garfiel opened his mouth but he couldn't think of what to say.

"Good evening," Reinhard said walking into the tent, "I heard your discussion when I entered the camp, as did most of our comrades I expect, and wished to bid you both goodnight before retiring to my own roll."

"Red," Felt said with a tired smile.

"Nice to see you again, Reinhard," Garfiel said standing up to shake his hand.

"To you as well, Master Garfiel. And you, of course, Miss Felt," Reinhard replied.

Garfiel looked at Felt and he thought hard for a moment. It took a rather *long* moment.

"Hey, Reinhard, do you think you could do me a big favor?" Garfiel asked slowly.

"Of course, my friend. You don't even have to ask," Reinhard replied smiling.

"Mind if we swap sleeping rolls tonight? See, I need to sleep on that side of the camp tonight because, uh, reasons," Garfiel finished lamely.

Reinhard blanched and then looked at Felt with a blush, "Please understand, I'd love to accommodate you, my friend-

"Great! Thanks, Reinhard!" Garfiel said walking out of the tent.

"...But I am not altogether certain that this is appropriate," Reinhard murmured to Garfiel's back.

Reinhard looked at Felt in confusion, "Why did Master Garfiel do that?"

"Maybe the dumb lug just wanted to do me a favor," Felt shrugged.

Reinhard looked puzzled and Felt hid a fond smile behind her hand.

Reinhard cleared his throat as he turned to Felt, "Miss Felt, it is a warm and clear night. I can simply take my roll outside and-

"Knock it off, Red," Felt snickered, "You're not going to sleep outside, there's plenty of room right here."

Reinhard frowned looking awkward, "You are certainly right, Miss Felt. However, even though I would die before pressing attentions on you that would be unwelcome, I am concerned for your reputation if I sleep-

"You'd be amazed how hard you'd have to work for your attention to be unwelcome to me, Red," Felt replied.

Reinhard blushed.

"Besides I don't have a reputation. I'm a girl from the slums," Felt shrugged.

"Anyone who dismisses you as such will answer to me personally, Miss Felt. You are gracious in victory and defeat, kind to the undeserving, and steadfast to friends in need or in plenty. You are a remarkable woman and you stand second to no one," Reinhard assured her.

Felt wrapped her arms around her knees and pressed her face against them, "Reinhard, could you do something for me?"

"Of course."

"Could you... could you just hold my hand while I fall asleep?" She asked.

Reinhard hesitated for only a moment, "Of course, Miss Felt. It would be my deep honor."

Felt laid down on her sleeping roll and Reinhard knelt down beside her.

Felt rolled her eyes, "Jeez, Reinhard! Just lie down!" She ordered.

Reinhard looked awkward but he laid down on his sleeping roll as he was directed.

Felt reached out and took Reinhard's hand. Reinhard blushed as red as his hair.

"Gods, Red," Felt whispered looking up at the dark tent's roof, "You're so awkward about simple things. You're just lucky that you look so cute when you blush."

"Miss Felt?" He asked in confusion.

She sighed, "Reinhard, did I ever tell you about... what the witch did to me?"

"I don't believe so," Reinhard replied.

"I guess I didn't really want to talk about it," She took a deep breath, "We were fighting a Sin Archbishop named Ley. Well, Subaru and the others were. I was standing in the trailer helplessly. The witch threw a spell of some kind at the Archbishop but she wound up cursing me and Subaru too..."

Reinhard gasped, "What happened?"

Felt squeezed his hand tight and bit her lip, "It," She choked and then took a deep breath, "It spread frost flowers all over the area. Beautiful delicate flowers of ice that grew out of the frozen ground in seconds."

"This was a curse?"

"And then they started growing on me..."

Reinhard looked at her in concern.

Felt swallowed, "I felt them growing inside of me, Red. They started by bursting out of my skin and then their roots dug deep into my body and," She swallowed hard, "I watched my blood flow up into the stems until the ice blossoms turned red from my blood. Their roots," Felt choked, "They sank deep inside of me and they started to crack open my bones the same way the roots of a tree split stone. And they... they... I could feel them sucking out my marrow..."

"Miss Felt..." He whispered in horror.

Felt squeezed her eyes shut and began to sob, "I can't live with it, Red. I see it, I feel it every time I close my eyes. I felt them growing all over me. One grew from my tongue and another grew out of my eye. A few grew out of my finger tips and their roots cracked through my nails like they were breaking a cracker! One of the largest grew out of my back and I heard... I actually *heard* my spine crack open. I thought I was going to die but I just kept living and more and more plants kept growing all over my body. They were everywhere, touching me everywhere, drinking me, sucking me dry. I stopped being afraid that I would die and started to pray for it. I just wanted it to stop!"

"Miss Felt, please don't speak so!" Reinhard urged.

Felt took a moment to steady herself, "Reinhard," Felt whispered, "Could you do something for me?"

"Of course, Miss Felt," He swore, "You have my word as knight. No matter the challenge, I will not falter!"

Felt bit her lip, "Could you... could you just hold me tonight?"

Reinhard looked shocked.

Felt's eyes were swimming with tears. She knew he would reject her request as completely inappropriate and she had no strength to insist.

She saw his mouth open to refuse and then close it again.

"Of course, Miss Felt," He replied, "Not even the Witch of Envy herself can harm you so long as you are in my arms."

Felt choked back a sob and Reinhard awkwardly wrapped his arms around her.

Felt buried her face in his chest and began to cry, "Red, what the fuck am I doing?" She demanded, "I don't cry! I don't think I've cried since I was five years old!"

"A wise man once told me that we are the sum of our tears. Too little and the soil is barren; nothing can grow," Reinhard whispered as he awkwardly stroked her hair.

Felt lay there sobbing into his chest.

"Miss Felt," Reinhard whispered, "This entire matter is all my fault. If I had been by your side, none of this ever would have happened. Subaru would not have been bewitched and abducted by that woman and her curse would never have afflicted you."

"It's nobody's fault but the witch's, Red," Felt whimpered, "She's the one who cursed me and bewitched Subaru. Besides," She half chuckled, "I could never stay mad at you for anything."

"Why not?"

Felt took a deep breath and then let it out slowly, "Reinhard, you are so so very stupid."

"What did I say?"

Felt lay there quietly for a time.

Felt sighed, "Reinhard, do you ever think about the future?"

"Not really, why?"

Felt sighed, "I don't know I... I guess the witch's curse has just made me feel more fragile than I used to. I'm starting to realize that if I don't tell people certain things now, I may never get another chance to tell them..."

"Words of wisdom, Miss Felt. You should unburden your mind about such things."

Reinhard felt her smile against his chest, "You really think so?" She asked in evident amusement.

"I sense that I am once again missing the joke. Or perhaps am the butt of it."

"No to both," Felt replied, "I was just realizing that there's something we need to talk about when things settle down."

"I am ever at your call, Miss Felt."

"I know," She whispered, "Thank you, Reinhard."

They were quiet for a moment.

"Reinhard, I think... I think maybe I can go to sleep now but..."

"I will guard you all night, Miss Felt," He promised.

"Don't do that, you dummy. You're tired too. Just let me rest here while we sleep, OK?"

"... Of course," Reinhard replied.

"Reinhard?"

"Yes?"

"I'm still afraid of the nightmares..." She confessed.

"Alas, Miss Felt. I can not enter your dreams and protect you from them unless you dream of me as well," Reinhard answered helplessly.

Felt looked up at him with a broad smile, "You know what? That's a great idea. Thanks, Red," She chuckled, "It's weird, Reinhard. I've only know you for a couple of weeks but somehow... I can't imagine my life without you... Or maybe I just don't want to..."

Felt laid her head back down on his chest and drifted off to sleep.

Reinhard lay there stroking the back of her head until her breathing became deep and even, a steady drone that lulled him off to sleep as well.

Subaru and Emilia walked long into the night.

God, I'm exhausted! How is Mili doing this so easily? Oh, she's probably using mana to sustain her muscles.

Crap. Why can't my Authority do that? Or can it do that but I just don't know how?

Great.

God, this has been the week from hell. Marching all day everyday, barely any sleep, lousy food, and always worried that we're about to be caught.

I can't handle much more of this. A few more days like this and I'm just going to collapse just from the stress. Every time I close my eyes I jerk awake when I hear any sound. I worry anything could be someone coming to take Emilia.

I keep imagining a group of soldiers surrounding us late one night. Or Reinhard stumbling over us.

Or Regulus.

OK, knock it off! You need to stay focused right now! You can go all to pieces later but first you need to get your family to safety. Then you can have your big breakdown and cry yourself to sleep in Emilia's arms.

Just keep picturing what will happen if your enemies or your friends catch up with Emilia. That should keep your legs moving.

You have one priority right now: You have to keep Emilia safe.

You have to keep Emilia safe.

You have to keep Emilia safe.

A few hours later Reinhard was awakened by Felt struggling in his arms.

He opened his eyes in shock and saw Felt sound asleep but thrashing, whimpering, and moaning. Tears streaming down her face as she slept.

Reinhard stared her at helplessly. He had no Blessing that could soothe her wounded heart and his skill with a sword was useless. No blade could slay the demons in her mind.

In desperation he held Felt closer, "I am with you, Miss Felt. Nothing can hurt you so long as I'm here. I give you my word as a knight of the kingdom."

Felt murmured in her sleep and then began to settle, "Reinhard," She whispered and a faint smile flickered across her face as she quieted.

"Miss Felt," He whispered, "What kind of demon could do such horrors to a noble hearted woman like yourself? Much less bewitch and enthrall one of the kindest and bravest men it has ever been my good fortune to know. I will resolve all of this, Miss Felt. The witch will pay for her crimes. I give you my world as a knight."

Reinhard looked at the tent ceiling, his thoughts dark.

This entire matter is all my fault. If I had not left Subaru alone, none of this ever would have happened. Could the witch have been planning this? That vast dark power that Subaru possesses, I know that it can be tamed under his will, I've seen him do it. But that same power must make him an extremely tempting target for the witch. Perhaps she'd been waiting for someone like Subaru for centuries.

Subaru Natsuki has the power to change this world. I've seen the evidence of it with my own eyes. Miss Felt has seen it

as well. When she told me about Subaru's 'engine' I initially dismissed it as a toy but Miss Felt instantly understood the world shattering potential of this device. What would Subaru Natsuki be capable of in just another year? Ever since the attack at Arlem, I've been beset by visions of Subaru changing this world into a paradise, leading whole nations into harmony, prosperity, and justice. But under the witch's influence, what if my dear friend Subaru was corrupted and sought to set the world aflame?

No. Things haven't gone that far yet. All the reports I've received suggest that even under the witch's influence, Subaru has preserved his integrity. He lured the Sin Archbishop Capella away from his friends, he spared the lives of Captain Falric's company when it would have been far easier (and perhaps objectively wiser) to have done otherwise.

Subaru can still be saved. I sense it. I simply need to separate him from the witch and give him time to recover.

However this is easier said than done. If Subaru has truly fallen so into her thrall as to choose the witch over Miss Felt, his treasured friend, then I must assume Subaru will also be unwilling to listen to me.

Such thoughts lead me to a dark place. Subaru being lost to shadow would be a catastrophic loss, both to his loved ones and for the world at large. And that doesn't even take into consideration the consequences of granting the Witch of Envy access to his staggering well of magical power and his considerable genius.

Given the extreme consequences of failure in this case, there can be no half measures. The needs of the world outweigh the concerns of my own heart and even those of my cherished friend. Subaru must be separated from the witch, even if it is against his will. Even if he Subaru comes to hate me for it. There is no other solution.

The witch much die.

***Chapter 14*: Chapter 14**

When dawn came, Subaru and Emilia were staggering. They had walked all day and all night but they had covered a huge distance, probably more than Crusch would have believed possible when she planned out her search.

They saw the King's highway in front of them and an inn nearby with several wagons parked there.

Subaru sighed, "With a little bit of luck, we can pick up a ride at that inn."

Emilia nodded wearily as they walked hand in hand over to the inn.

"Do you think any of these wagons are going to Gusteko?" Emilia asked.

"Only one way to find out," Subaru said gently shaking Beatrice awake.

The little spirit stirred with a yawn and then started looking around in confusion, "When did Betty fall asleep?"

Subaru laughed, "Quite some time ago actually."

"Good morning, Subaru," Puck yawned and stretched.

"OK, guys," Subaru murmured, "So we're in the home stretch of our escape here. We're going to go into that inn. It looks like they're already up and cooking judging by the smoke coming from the chimney. We'll go in and order some food. We could all use a hot breakfast. You guys try to blend in: Emilia keep your hood up and Beako try to change your clothes to something plainer, probably something with a hood so that those adorable drill braids of yours don't make you stand out."

Beatrice sighed, "Betty is tired of trying to blend in. Betty is supposed to be captivating to the eye for a reason, I suppose," She muttered changing her clothes back to a plain gray robe with a hood.

"And Puck-"

"Oh please, Subaru, don't say it," Puck moaned.

"Try to pretend to be a normal cat while we're in there," Subaru said with a fond smile.

"He said it!" Puck mourned.

"No talking, no flying, and no magic," Subaru chuckled, "It's either that or hide in the gem but I thought you might like some food too."

Puck sank down into Beatrice's arms with a moan.

"Alright, let's buck up. We're almost out of here. We just have a little bit further to go," Subaru encouraged them.

Subaru and Emilia walked into the inn. Beatrice walked behind them carrying Puck in her arms. The inn had a large dining room with a bar although the room was almost empty this early in the morning.

"Hey there, stranger," A chubby brown haired woman in an apron said from behind the bar, "My name is Fran. What can I do for you?"

"We're looking for a hot breakfast," Subaru said.

"Sure thing, darling," The woman replied. "We're cooking up eggs and porridge right now with bacon on the side. It's three coppers a plate."

Subaru nodded and pulled a silver piece out of his pouch.

The woman took the coin, "Have a seat anywhere you like, Hun. The food will be out shortly."

"One question," Subaru said as Emilia and Beatrice grabbed a table in the corner, "Maybe you can help me with something."

"Asking is free," The innkeeper shrugged.

"I'm trying to get my family clear of all the havoc that's happening out west," Subaru said honestly.

"Oh dear. You poor people are refugees from that mess?" The innkeeper asked sympathetically, "I've seen quite a few pass this way trying to get shut of those troubles. You must have had a hard time on the road."

Subaru gave her a half smile, "Well, not as hard as some, I suppose. Anyway, I'm trying to get up into Gusteko. I think my cousin might give us a place to stay while things calm down. You seem to have some wagoneers staying here. Do you know if any of them might be headed that way and willing to take a few passengers? I can pay."

The innkeeper scratched her chin, "Maybe. I think Ayane might be headed up that way to pick up some goods. She's actually really nice about taking passengers, sometimes she doesn't even make you pay if you're down on your luck."

"I can pay," Subaru assured her.

"Why don't you and your family sit down and eat some breakfast. I'll talk to her about it when she comes down. Shouldn't be much longer. Traders tend to get on the road early."

"Thank you," Subaru said and tipped her three copper pieces.

"Thank you, sir," She said with pleasure.

Subaru walked over to join his family at the table.

"OK, so she thinks maybe she can find us a ride," He whispered.

"That would be wonderful," Emilia sighed.

"It might be another two or three days to the border on foot," Subaru murmured, "If we catch a ride, I bet we'd make it today."

Subaru stopped talking as Fran brought them three plates loaded with eggs and bacon and a bowl of porridge balanced on each.

"Here you go, enjoy," Fran said putting the dishes down in front of them, "Oh my, what an adorable little kitty cat."

Subaru winced and he saw Puck's eyes narrow. He was sure that the magic cat was barely restraining himself from throwing hard words and possibly even harder ice crystals at the woman.

"Hello dear," Fran said to Beatrice in the sing-song voice some people reserve for speaking with small children, "My name is Fran! What's your name?"

Beatrice stared at her completely baffled.

Beako looks shocked by the way this woman is speaking to her. That's good because once the shock vanishes, Beako is likely to mop the floor with Fran for speaking baby-talk to her like this.

"That's our Betty," Subaru interjected nervously.

"Oh, hello Betty," She crooned in the same voice, "Can you tell me how old you are?"

"Betty wants to know why you're speaking to her as if she doesn't understand the common tongue, I suppose," Beatrice replied looking very uncomfortable.

"Oh my!" Fran said in surprise, "Your daughter is extremely well spoken for her age!"

"Yeah, she's a voracious reader," Subaru agreed with a weak smile.

Luckily, some other travelers began to emerge looking for breakfast. Fran bustled off to attend to them and spared Subaru the trouble of trying to make the spirits conceal themselves.

Subaru heard Puck and Beatrice grumbling under their breath as Beatrice took a few choice bites of her breakfast and fed a few to Puck.

Emilia and Subaru dug into their food with gusto. It was the first real meal they'd had since leaving the Sanctuary.

I need to sleep, Subaru mused to himself. The funny thing is that my brain feels so burnt right now that I'm not sure I could sleep. I literally feel too tired to sleep. I never imagined that could even be a thing.

Thank God, we're almost out of here. I have nothing left. This horrible week has taken me right out to my limit. If anything else goes wrong I think I might shatter like glass. Or shatter somebody else like glass, maybe.

Emilia must be even more exhausted than I am. She went through two weeks at the Sanctuary before I even showed up.

Well, Mili is way tougher than I am. The stress of the past week has taken me right out to my breaking point.

I need to sleep.

"Hey Hun," Fran said approaching their table with a pleasant faced young woman with dark hair, "This is Ayane. She's a merchant who works the trade route between the capitol and Orcos. She says that she is going to Orcos and she'll be happy to take you."

Subaru looked the woman over. She seemed barely older than Subaru. She had bright eyes and a wide smile. She had the kind of face one instinctively likes which was probably a huge asset when bargaining over goods. She was dressed in a red outfit that made Subaru think of Renaissance Italy. In a world where most women wore dresses, Ayane wore trousers and a red cape and wore a large flamboyant hat with a feather in it.

"Fran told me about how you were running away from the battles out west," Ayane said sympathetically, "I'm really sorry about all the trouble you've been through. I've been helping a lot of people get out of the area either toward the capitol or up into Gusteko. It's my good deed for the year *and* it also gives me a chance to pick up some extra coin!" She said flashing them a wolf grin.

"Well, we can pay for the ride, don't worry," Subaru replied.

"No, no, I'm just kidding!" Ayane laughed, "Err, well mostly just kidding. A few extra coins would be nice. How about three silvers for the trip?"

Sounds more than reasonable. She must be cutting the price to help folks get out of here.

Subaru pulled out three silver coins and handed them to Ayane.

"So it's just the three of you?" She asked.

"Plus a cat," Subaru pointed out.

"Oh, sorry, cats are double," Ayane said sadly.

Subaru stared at her and Ayane burst out laughing, "I'm joking! Jeez, you need to learn to lighten up a little. You'll die young with that attitude! Anyway, I'm going to grab a quick bite and then we can head off if that's OK with you lot."

"Sure, we're ready whenever," Subaru shrugged.

"Nice!" Ayane said cheerfully walking off to eat her breakfast.

Fran leaned down to whisper in Subaru's ear, "I know she's a little strange but she's very sweet. She's been helping lots of people get clear of the troubles. She acts like a cold blooded trader but I've seen her take people out of here who couldn't even pay. She'll do you right."

"Thanks, Fran," Subaru replied as the innkeeper bustled away.

"That woman is very strange. Both of them actually," Beatrice muttered.

"Feels like our luck is finally changing," Emilia whispered.

"Oh, give it five minutes, Mili. It will change back."

"Subaru, Betty isn't sure if you are joking or not," Beatrice said.

"Neither am I," Subaru chuckled.

Ayane had a large wagon with a covered roof pulled by two earth dragons. Subaru and company sat in the back as they pulled out of the inn.

Ayane talked a blue-streak and seemed largely indifferent to if anyone responded to what she said.

This suited Subaru and Emilia right down to the ground as they were able to get some much needed sleep.

Beatrice and Puck were much better rested so they just dozed a bit and cuddled during the journey north.

Subaru was only vaguely aware of the wagon coming to a stop until Beatrice shook him awake.

"Subaru, something is going on outside," Beatrice whispered.

Emilia was still fast asleep. Subaru heard Ayane talking to someone. She'd stepped down off the driver's seat.

"Stay here and watch Mili," Subaru told Beatrice and Puck.

Subaru moved to the front of the wagon and stepped out onto the driver's platform. They were stopped on the road in an evergreen forest. Ayane was talking to a massive man with brown skin. He looked like Rom's much younger brother.

The wagon was surrounded by twenty men with the look of bandits. They were all armed but their gear was old and poorly maintained. Their clothing was ratty. The men noticed Subaru standing there and began to leer and point at him laughing.

"-two of them," Ayane was telling the giant, "One is a beautiful elf girl, she should fetch an amazing price at market, and the little girl is adorable-" Ayane suddenly became aware of Subaru, "Oh, hi! Hey good news, I found some people willing to take you in! Your girls are going to have a home for a long long time!" Ayane said cheerfully.

"My girls?" Subaru said in a voice like ice, stepping down off the wagon.

"Yeah, I'm afraid that you're too scrawny and ugly to bring a good price," Ayane shrugged, "I'm guessing the boys here will amuse themselves with you a little tonight and that should be the end of your problems. It gets boring out here in the woods, you know."

The bandits all chuckled and several drew long knives.

Ayane turned back toward the giant, "Remember I'll be watching the auctions in Kararagi. Don't try to cheat me," She warned him.

The giant snorted drawing a sword, "You can take that up with the boss." The giant marched toward Subaru while his men cheered him on, "So, you going to make this easy on us or hard on yourself?"

Subaru had eyes only for Ayane, "You're slavers," He said flatly.

"Now that's an unpleasant term," Ayane complained, "I prefer to say that I find folks who don't belong anywhere and bring them to people who want them."

Subaru's mind whirled with images of Emilia and Beatrice in chains, being hurt and abused. His logical mind told him that they could both protect themselves, likely better than he could, but this latest threat was too much and the stress and frustration of the last few days finally overwhelmed him.

To his surprise, Subaru didn't even feel particularly angry. Instead of hot rage he felt ice cold hate. He looked around at literal monsters in human form and felt nothing but disgust and contempt.

Subaru finally turned his attention toward the giant, "I'm going to give you all one chance," He warned quietly.

A few of the bandits stopped smiling at the tone in his voice and looked at each other uncertainly.

"Start running right now, and I'll have to pick which ones of you I kill. Stay here and you're all going to die," Subaru said in a voice chill as death.

There was a moment of complete silence and then the bandits started laughing.

The giant threw his head back roaring with laughter, "I guess we're going to do this the hard way then!" He said to loud cheers.

"Yeah, I guess we are," Subaru replied quietly, "Personally, I'm looking forward to it."

Subaru walked slowly up to the giant who had finally contained his laughter and was beginning to look annoyed. He flung a wicked backhand at Subaru's face and then screamed out in pain as his arm hit something much harder than stone.

Subaru grabbed hold of the giant's arm, placed his hand against the brute's chest and pushed firmly.

The giant went flying backwards at least twenty feet tumbling head over heels in the dirt.

The bandits all stared in shock as the giant rose to his feet shaking his head to clear it. Then the giant's eyes widened in horror as he realized that his arm had been torn off at the shoulder.

The giant started to run around in circles screaming incoherently as a river of blood poured out of his shoulder. A few moments later he fell to his knees and his face grew white. He took a long shuddering breath, fell down on his face, and then lay still.

Huh. This might be the first person I ever killed that didn't horrify me. I don't even feel bad about it. I feel... weird.

The whole world feels like its made of glass right now. I feel like if I just let out a little bit of what I'm feeling, I could shatter everything around me.

Fifteen seconds until Indomitable but luckily nobody looks anxious to move.

"You know," Subaru murmured drawing everyone's eyes back to him as he casually swung the giant's enormous arm around like a conductor's baton, "I just want to tell you all, I'm in a *really* bad mood right now. And frankly, I'm only going to get into a worse mood as this goes on. So let me just say: Anyone who would like to die immediately and spare themselves the trouble of being chased down and torn apart piece by piece, please form a double line in front of me," Subaru realized that he was starting to yell without even intending to, "I can have the whole lot of you in the arms of whichever God you worship in a minute!" He roared.

The bandits recoiled and then they all took off screaming, running in every direction.

Ayane ran away as fast as she had ever moved in her life. Why did things like this happen to her? How could she have been expected to know that one of the people she'd offered a ride to would be a monster? She didn't hear Subaru chasing after her and for a moment she thought she would get away.

Then there was a horrible pressure on her neck and Ayane was jerked off her feet, falling down on her back in the dirt. She looked up in horror to see Subaru standing over her, expressionless. He had her cape wrapped around his fist.

"Oh dear, another fashion victim," Subaru murmured in a distant voice.

"Heh heh, hey listen! This whole thing was all just a *big* misunderstanding," Ayane said with a sickly grin.

"Yeah. You misunderstood how much it would cost you," Subaru replied in a calm voice.

"No, wait! Listen, I can help you! I-"

"Good. I was hoping that you'd say that," Subaru replied.

Ayane swallowed hard. Subaru's dead eyes and dull voice were almost as frightening as the still dripping arm he held in his other hand.

"Those crooks have a camp around here, I assume?" Subaru asked.

"Uh, yeah," Ayane replied.

"And can I assume that their boss is there?" Subaru asked tugging on Ayane's cape, choking her until she begrudgingly got to her feet. Trying to get as far away from Subaru as possible, she tried to slip around a nearby dead tree.

"Probably. He spends a lot of time there," Ayane replied looking around frantically for a distraction.

"How many bandits in this gang?"

"You just scarred off most of them. Maybe another ten or fifteen are left," Ayane replied.

"And I assume they have all the slaves in their camp that haven't been brought to market?"

"Well yeah, where else-"

"Which is why you're going to bring me there," Subaru said dropping the giant's arm at Ayane's feet and wrapping her cape around his fist like a leash.

Ayane's eyes bulged out, "No way! You don't know what these guys are like! You can't imagine what they'd do to me if I-"

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and punched the tree. It exploded in a thousand pieces of wooden shrapnel. A large piece of flying wood sliced Ayane's face leaving a bloody cut right beneath her left eye.

Huh, Subaru thought distantly, I wonder if maybe I'm getting stronger when I use Indomitable. Not that it helps any. Being able to hit harder doesn't mean much when you can already blast people into bloody chunks with one blow. If the ability is going to be enhanced, why couldn't I use Indomitable for longer? That would actually be useful.

"So, here's a question for you," Subaru asked Ayane calmly, "Would you rather something horrible be done to you by the *slavers* or by me?"

Ayane got a sick look on her face.

Subaru glanced back at the wagon and saw Emilia and the spirits peaking out, wide eyed and open mouthed.

"You guys stay here," Subaru told them, "I'm going to go take care of something."

"What?" Puck demanded, "We're not going to just wait here while you go off to raid a *slaver* camp-"

"Stay here, Puck!" Subaru said in a tone that immediately silenced the Great Spirit, "This is going to be really ugly and I don't want *any* of you involved!"

Puck drifted down into Beatrice's arms as he watched Subaru wide eyed.

Fuck, why am I yelling at Puck? He didn't do anything wrong. I'm starting to lose control here...

Something is wrong. I feel cold and hard inside. It's almost as if I used Reason and Judgment...

Whatever. I need to take care of this mess first.

Subaru tugged on Ayane's cape not gently, "So. Weren't you about to lead me somewhere?" He asked.

The bandit camp had one building the size of a barn and two other smaller buildings, all surrounded by a log palisade.

"OK, I've brought you to the camp! You don't need me anymore so please just let me go," Ayane begged.

"Not yet. That's a big heavy gate. I think maybe you could get us inside," Subaru mused.

"No!" Ayane whispered, "I'm already in enough trouble! If I-"

"So," Subaru murmured, staring down at his clenched fist in contemplation, "Are you saying that you're of no more use to me?"

Ayane gulped and quickly knocked on the gate.

"Who is it?" A gruff voice cried out from behind the gate.

"It's... It's Ayane," She croaked. "There's somebody here..." Ayane fumbled for a story, "He has an offer for the boss!"

There was some grumbling inside but the gate slowly creaked open.

A tall man with scars on his forehead stood there staring at Subaru and Ayane in confusion.

Ayane tried to run away but Subaru's grip didn't slip and she was once again jerked off her feet. She fell to the ground, her upper body dangling limply from Subaru's fist.

"Why won't this cape rip?" Ayane mourned to herself.

Weird. Ayane isn't a large woman but she isn't Beatrice either. It's funny that I can support her weight with one hand without even feeling it.

"What's this?" The man growled as a few more men came to stand beside him.

"Is this 'the boss?'" Subaru asked Ayane calmly.

"No, that's Wilks," Ayane moaned. "Osril is probably inside the building."

"Got it," Subaru replied. "So, Wilks," Subaru began mildly, "I need to have a word with your boss and you're in my way. And if you refuse to get *out* of my way, I think that I might have to give you a little push."

Wilks looked baffled and Ayane who still dangled from Subaru's fist, covered her face with both hands with a whimper.

After dealing with Wilks and the others, Subaru entered the main building.

Ayane had refused to get back on her feet after watching Subaru rip the bandits apart with his bare hands, so Subaru literally dragged her around by her cape. Inside the building Subaru found a lavishly decorated area that resembled a nobleman's bedroom. However this room had huge cages full of people near the bed and a desk full with strange tools that had blood on them.

Those are torture devices, Subaru thought clinically. It is most unlikely that any worthwhile information could be extracted from random travelers. Logically then, these tools were used for entertainment.

A large fat man with a double chin and a 'barely there' mustache was kneeling naked on the bed. The man was leering at a crying young woman who desperately tried to cover her nudity. The man was slapping her repeatedly.

"I'd usually tell you to stop crying, but honestly it's starting to turn me on," The man giggled in a posh accent.

"What a horrifying sight," Subaru murmured in an almost abstracted voice.

The man spun around in shock, "Who are you?! Who let you in here? Ayane, how dare you disturb me!"

The woman on the bed curled up and continued crying.

Ayane covered her face with both hands and whimpered.

"So, pain brings you pleasure?" Subaru asked in a casual voice.

Subaru didn't even bother triggering *Indomitable*. He just smashed his fist into the side of the man's face leaving a large purple bruise.

Subaru's face was impassive.

"You bastard-" The man cried out but Subaru immediately brought his fist around with a backhand. He just kept hitting him: three times, four times, five times.

The blows were rhythmic. Subaru wasn't even angry. Beating the fat nobleman wasn't cathartic, it was just a chore like any other chore. The man needed to be beaten and Subaru was beating him.

Subaru's emotions felt deadened. His body moved on autopilot. Beneath everything else was an ironclad sense of certainty, of conviction: this was something that simply needed to be done and since Subaru was the most appropriate person to do it, Subaru was doing it. There was nothing more to the situation than that and there was nothing about it worth thinking about.

"Mercy! Please stop hitting me!" The fat man begged backing away on the bed.

"You don't enjoy it?" Subaru mused.

"Of course, I don't enjoy it, you great fool! Don't you know who I am?!" The man spat through a fat bleeding lip. The naked man pushed past Subaru and rushed to the door, falling on his knees. "Guards! Come help me! We have an intruder!"

His words echoed throughout the building as Subaru walked up behind him in no great hurry. Subaru was still dragging Ayane by her cape. She was whimpering and covering her eyes.

"Why doesn't anyone answer me?" The man asked nobody.

"Well, your guards have either run away, or are dead and rotting," Subaru informed him calmly.

The naked fat man turned to face Subaru with growing horror.

Subaru reflected for a moment, "After everything that I've seen, I see no reason to spare your life."

"Stop! Please, why are you doing this?!" He begged.

Subaru's jaw dropped. "Why... Why am I doing this?" Subaru echoed in a tone of wonder. Subaru looked at the barely dressed women in cages who all bore clear marks of abuse on their bodies, "Are you serious? Did you really just ask me that? After everything that you've done, after the horrors that sit in this very room, you really don't understand why you deserve to be punished?"

The fat man gazed up at him in confusion.

For perhaps the first time in his entire life, Subaru felt no doubt or indecision in him at all.

"This is what it means to be truly unworthy of life!" Subaru snarled.

The man's eyes widened but before he could move Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and delivered a deliberately half hearted kick to the man's chest.

The man went flying and struck the opposing wall with a cracking sound. His chest was caved in where Subaru struck him but his eyes were still horribly aware. The man opened his mouth but nothing came out but a great glut of blood.

Ayane squeaked.

The man fell down on his face, struggling to move as his damaged lungs wheezed for breath. He was still alive and conscious but dying slowly, his limbs now refusing to support him. He looked pleadingly up at Subaru, begging for mercy.

"Lie there and rot," Subaru said firmly.

Subaru approached the cages. There were more than a dozen women of various races inside. Some were grown women and some seemed no older than Petra. They wore dirty, ripped tunics and had no shoes.

"Please don't hurt us!" One of the older women with reddish brown hair asked him with a cringing look in her eye as she held a young girl in her arms tightly.

"I don't intend to," Subaru murmured in a distant voice.

He swung his fist and shattered the cage's lock.

Subaru dimly heard a small voice deep inside of him: *Wait a second! I didn't even trigger Indomitable for that! The lock shouldn't have shattered, it should have been my hand that broke! What's going on?*

Subaru heard these thoughts but he didn't waste any time pondering them. They didn't seem important right now.

The cage door slowly creaked open. The women inside stared at Subaru in terror, one clutching a young girl to her chest protectively. Several women stared at the whimpering Ayane who dangled from Subaru's fist.

"What's your name?" Subaru asked the brown haired woman, his voice holding only the faintest hint of curiosity. He continued to break open the cages.

"...Ellen," The woman whispered.

Subaru glanced at the broken body of the slaver nearby who seemed to be taking his last breaths now.

"OK!" Ayane said desperately, "All of the slaves are free! Happy ending! Hey, how about you let me go now? Oh, I know! I can take all of these girls back to the capitol and get them some help! That'd be a good idea, right?"

"Ayane," One of the women hissed.

Subaru glanced at them, "You know her?"

Almost all the women nodded.

Subaru scratched his chin, "Ayane, tell me: was Fran involved in this scheme in any way?"

"Fran?" Ayane asked in surprise, "No! Why would we involve that old idiot? Look, I can be useful to you! You don't want to kill me!"

"I don't really see how you can be of any use to me, Ayane," Subaru mused, "You're a decent slaver but a lousy merchant. Anastasia would have made me promise to set her free before she gave me any information. You're absolutely useless to me, but on the other hand, I don't really feel like killing you so I'm going to make you an offer where you can leave," Subaru let go of her cape and Ayane fell flat on her face.

A few of the slaves glowered at Subaru but they were all too beaten down to object.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you! You won't regret it, I'll do whatever you want! I'm useful, you'll see!" Ayane groveled with a pathetically grateful grin on her face.

"Splendid," Subaru replied in the same dead voice, "My offer is this: You can leave just as soon as all of them," Subaru pointed at the enslaved women surrounding them, "Decide that you're sufficiently sorry for what you put them through."

The room was completely silent as Ayane's smile faded to a horrified look. She turned to look at the slaves who stared down at her stone faced.

Ellen picked up a short knife from the desk, "Because of you," She whispered looking at the weapon almost contemplatively, "I lost my daughter to the slave market. I may never see her again."

Another woman picked up a tool that looked like bolt cutters, "I remember the night you brought me here. You saw what they did to me and you laughed!"

A younger girl picked up a hammer, "They sold my sister..." She whispered.

"Wait! Listen! I can help you find them!" Ayane begged, "I have connections! I can find out where they-"

Ayane was struck in the side of the head by a blunt object.

The slaves fell on Ayane like grim vengeance and Ayane soon stopped begging and could only scream in pain but quickly those too fell silent.

Subaru watched the entire process with an abstracted air of boredom.

He felt nothing.

Subaru led all the women outside. It was obvious to Subaru that the women were nearly as terrified of him as they were of the slavers.

This matter did not concern him.

Interesting. I'm not frozen in place but, aside from that, it feels very much as if Reason and Judgment were triggered. I feel smarter, more in control, and more indifferent to immaterial concerns. Little details that would normally be undetectable are leaping out at me. The world even seems to be moving at a slower pace around me. The world isn't frozen but everything feels as if it's happening in slow motion. Intriguing. It may not make me any faster myself but this 'slow time' could be far more useful in most cases than Reason and Judgment's frozen time.

I was also able to shatter those locks without using Indomitable and carry Ayane's worthless body around without any effort.

There is only one logical explanation for all of this: For the first time, I have truly connected with my Authority. Its unimaginable strength flows through me. The Authority has granted me Reason and Judgment's insight without the corresponding disadvantages. Arguably, Reason and Judgment's advantages have even been enhanced. Perhaps this isn't the true power and affinity over the Authority that Roswaal spoke of but it is certainly a first step in that direction.

When Subaru and the slaves emerged from the building he found that some of the bandits he'd driven off had returned. Almost twenty of them and all armed with bows and arrows. They were spread out around the courtyard in a tight half circle with bows drawn.

"That's our property, freak!" One of them shouted. He was clearly terrified but the men felt braver now that they could attack from a distance. "Those are our slaves and we're the ones who are going to take them to market! You think you can just waltz in here and take what we rightfully captured first?"

The bandits all growled in assent.

I really must stop referring to these fools as bandits. They are slavers. Calling these men 'bandits' is an insult to bandits. If there was less blood on their hands than on Ayane's and their employer's, it was purely due to lack of opportunity.

Subaru dimly noticed the women all fleeing back inside the building. He payed more attention to a storage barrel that sat just before the door to the courtyard.

"You have a peculiar notion of morality," Subaru mused to the lead bandit. He grabbed the lid off the barrel and

casually tossed it in the air before catching it again. "Your attitude is, in its simplest terms, 'might makes right.' It's a shortsighted philosophy: One that is generally abandoned as soon as the speaker encounters anyone mightier. You all returning here to face me was a very poor decision."

Several of the bandits loosed their arrows.

Poor discipline. They should have all fired their arrows together, Subaru thought. He watched a barrage of five arrows flying toward him in slow motion. *No matter. Reason and Judgment's slow time gives me all the advantage that I require.*

Subaru didn't even bother to trigger *Indomitable*. He watched the arrows fly toward him and made a quick calculation.

Subaru swung his hand at just the right time and simply brushed all five arrows aside, flinging them to the ground.

The bandits gaped at him.

"I suppose that, in a sense, I am grateful," Subaru admitted. "It concerned me that I had let you escape. You could have gone on to create much trouble but to chase you all down in the woods would have been too much bother. Now I can kill you all at once."

The lead bandit's face was chalk white and his lips trembled, "Loose arrows!" He screamed.

The bandits all fired at once.

Well, their firing discipline is much improved this time, Subaru thought. *That's to be admired, although it will not save them.*

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* just before the first arrow struck and they all bounced off him harmlessly. Subaru was already moving, calmly running toward the bandits.

However, the five bandits who had fired their arrows prematurely had now redrawn and sent a new volley toward Subaru just as *Indomitable* time out.

Five arrows. Two of them are going wide. These are not the best archers.

He caught two arrows in the barrel lid. Subaru neatly plucked the third arrow out of mid air, as easily as he might have caught a baseball.

The bandits tried to redraw their bows but Subaru was now on the left side of their formation and the men were standing in a line before him, obstructing their own fire.

Subaru was close enough to touch the bandit on the far left. His eyes bugged out and he desperately reached for another arrow.

Poor training. He should have dropped his bow and drawn his sword when his enemy got this close. I will demonstrate why this is a flawed strategy.

Subaru took the arrow he'd caught and plunged it deep into the bandit's neck.

The bandit's eyes bulged and Subaru watched him convulsively drop his bow. The bandit reached up to grab his neck, his eyes wide with horror as his knees buckled underneath him.

Subaru deftly plucked the dying bandit's sword from its sheath before he fell and dropped the barrel lid.

The bandits were trying to reposition themselves so that they no longer blocked their own arrows. One enormous bandit was charging toward Subaru with a huge double-sided axe in hand.

There's also a bandit coming up behind me with his sword drawn, Subaru mused in an abstracted tone. *I can see it from the shadow he casts on the ground in front of me. He's raising his sword high over head for a lateral strike across my neck. He's taking advantage of the large bandit with the axe's distraction to behead me. Excellent strategy.*

Subaru felt nothing but boredom as he he watched the men close in on him, *That said, I feel compelled to demonstrate why this isn't a workable idea against me.*

Judging by the shadow of the sword I see, the bandit behind me is left handed and that means that his dominant foot is his left foot. When he starts to swing his sword, that foot will be extended and most of his weight will be placed upon it.

As the two bandits prepared to strike, Subaru crouched down. The bandit's sword swing went wide over his head and Subaru swung his own sword behind his back, slicing into the dirt behind him.

Subaru also sliced through the bandits boot amputating the toes on his left foot.

The man's momentum will carry him forward and now that his toes are missing there is no way for him to halt it.

From his crouched position, Subaru looked up calmly at the enormous bandit whose battle axe was descending toward Subaru's head. Subaru dropped his sword, no longer requiring it. He reached over his left shoulder, palm up, and a moment later felt the weight of the bandit behind him falling onto his hand.

Subaru saw the axe descending toward his head with unstoppable force. With a mighty heave, Subaru pulled the bandit

that had fallen on top of him forward and the axe buried itself in the bandit's back with a loud cracking sound.

The enormous bandit's expression is quite comical. That axe buried itself in the wrong torso as far as both men were concerned. Amusing.

Subaru stood up and using the fallen bandit's own momentum, he flung the broken body at the enormous bandit as the man recoiled.

Both men went crashing to the ground, the axe having impaled both their torsos. The men were screaming, both grievously wounded but alive.

Subaru calmly brushed himself off as two more bandits raced toward him, swords raised and each preparing to slice Subaru in half diagonally.

These men are either fearless or fools. The latter seems far more probable. Those sword swings are terrible. They're each trying to cut through a human body by the shoulder? Aiming for literally any other target would have been more effective. They're both moving at full speed so they haven't even considered the possibility of counters to their tactics.

Subaru did what the bandits would have never expected an unarmed man to do: He stepped toward them.

Subaru watched in slow motion as their expressions blossom into confusion. The bandits were running too fast to course correct and their swords slashed through the empty air behind Subaru.

Before the men could recover, Subaru drove his fingers into the bandits' throats just below their Adam's apple as hard as he could.

The two bandits recoiled and instinctively dropped their swords raising both hands to protect their vulnerable throats but Subaru's hands were already there. He grabbed each by the neck and lifted them off the ground. The slavers clutched impotently at the hands around their throats as their feet danced and kicked the air uselessly.

Remarkable. I'm holding two muscular men over my head and I barely feel any strain. I'm not even using Indomitable. Even if I had triggered Indomitable, I normally couldn't do this. Indomitable allows me to hit harder and makes me unable to be affected by outside forces but it doesn't directly increase my physical strength. The new connection with my Authority seems to be enhancing my strength in unforeseen ways. Or perhaps it's granting me increased mana which is now increasing my strength, speed, and agility as it does with Emilia.

I must explore this.

The other bandits stared at Subaru in horror. In seconds he had shrugged off a hail of arrows and killed one archer. He had grievously wounded two men who were currently screaming on the ground trapped together on the double sided axe that had impaled them both. And now Subaru was holding two strong men high above his head without any apparently strain.

The first duty of any great lord worthy of the name, is to see that the law is faithfully upheld and that those who show him loyalty are made to prosper without fear or coercion. I shall affirm this responsibility here and now by cleansing this land of those who have proved themselves unworthy of my protection.

Snapping the bandits' necks would have been easy but it also lacked a certain gravitas for this important moment. This was the first step in Subaru's apotheosis, his journey toward perfection as this world's only rightful ruler. It demanded a bit of panache.

Instead of crushing their necks, Subaru squeezed their throats, slowly asphyxiating the men.

"I admit, I must accept some responsibility for this situation," Subaru said conversationally to the assembled bandits, "Prior to this, I have attempted to abase and humble myself before lesser men, aspiring to turn them toward good works by sheer example. I confess that I believed this mission was always doomed to fail, but it seems to me that a great lord, such as myself, must occasionally offer those beneath him the opportunity to exceed his well reasoned expectations.

"Regrettably, however, in this case, as indeed in most cases, my judgment was clear and correct. This world has suffered for far too long bereft of my guidance and gentle correction. If I had acted more decisively and admitted that common men were incapable of rising to the occasion, I might have averred much hardship for myself and others. It pains me to accept the responsibility of this but, alas, I am at the mercy of my own generous heart. My weakness is that I am simply too compassionate, too forgiving. Despite my admirable intentions, the reality remains that I simply expected too much of the lesser men of this land and imposed upon them unfair and unrealistic expectations in clear defiance of their capabilities. I must therefore accept chastisement for this mistake and correct my course.

"This land cries out for enlightened leadership! Regardless of my personal preferences in this regard, I am clearly the most well equipped to perform this task, and should not the man most fit to the role be the man to whom that role is assigned? After all, it is the natural order of things for lesser men to yearn for the guidance and leadership of their betters. Would it not be utterly selfish of me to deny myself to them? Would it not be equally madness incarnate for the Sun to reserve its glorious radiance for itself alone?

"I admit, I am uncertain that this land actually *deserves* me, but in my boundless benevolence toward my adopted home, I will remit this and keep faith in its potential to improve under my loving guidance and become a world truly worthy of me. I shall begin here and now by offering my own good justice to those sorely in need of it."

The bandits all stared at Subaru, completely unable to parse his dense speech. The two bandits futilely tried to break his grip, gasping for breath.

"Fire at will!" The bandit leader screamed desperately.

The bandits suddenly remembered their bows and they launched a rain of arrows overhead, all firing rapidly.

Subaru looked at the arrows descending toward him with bemusement. As the arrows flew, Subaru caught them-

With the bodies of the men he held.

The men struggled to gather enough breath to scream as the hail of arrows pierced their backs.

Subaru made a bit of a game of it. He tried to catch the same number of arrows in each body.

Unfortunately due to the sheer number of arrows being fired and the limitations of how fast he could move the bodies, this task defeated him.

Disappointing. The one on the left caught two more arrows than the one on the right. A small issue to be sure but I do so hate any reminders of my imperfections. I am the Great Lord Subaru Natsuki, the rightful master of this entire world. Imperfection in one of my station is unacceptable.

The bandits could only stare at Subaru. Their quivers were now empty and Subaru had endured all their arrows without so much as a scratch. The only people wounded had been their own men who had been perforated by countless arrows and now feebly struggled in Subaru's grip.

Subaru cocked his head at the the bandits before him, "Be of good cheer," He told them calmly. "Your lives up until this very moment were wretched, wasted things: squandered in the pursuit of wealth and dubious pleasures. Nothing you have done up until now had value in any way. However, in my infinite benevolence, I have decided to amend this. Your lives will be sacrificed in pursuit of my apotheosis as the rightful lord of this world. Rejoice, for in your deaths, you will each have finally been of use."

The bandits he choked shook their heads in violent negation.

"You have each done nothing with your lives but inflict pain and misery," Subaru sympathized, "But by my actions shall you be redeemed. In time, your senseless depravity will be forgotten. All that history will ever remember about you is that you fell to my hand as the first act in my glorious quest to bring true peace and order to this land. Take comfort in that as you die," Subaru urged them as their eyes rolled back in their heads and they stopped moving.

A shadow fell upon Subaru.

Hm. A bandit managed to approach me from behind while I was distracted. Yet more imperfections. Distressing in one such as I. I fear that if this continues I may yet become annoyed.

The man's swing is too close to dodge so I must use Indomitable.

It is somewhat surprising that I have not needed to use it thus far, in fact. Perhaps I may take some satisfaction in that. True perfection might elude me for the moment but is it not the chase that makes the final reward sweet? And, in all fairness, would I want to have perfection simply handed to me? To receive such power handed to one on a silver platter might be fine for men like Reinhard who were content to merely be born great, but I am the illustrious Subaru Natsuki. I shall achieve greatness through my own will. My exalted Authority sought me out and justly submitted itself to my will in recognition of my extraordinary talent and potential. As it is so rightly said: 'Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.'

Subaru triggered Indomitable as the bandit took a wild swing across the back of Subaru's throat.

The sword stopped as if it had struck a mountain.

The bandits all gasped as Subaru sighed in irritation and turned to face his attacker.

"Why would you so crudely interrupt my speech?" He asked, "I was attempting to offer these men, undeserving though they might be, some comfort before their deaths," He chastised the bandit. "I fear that, in spite of my generous disposition, I am becoming annoyed with you."

Desperately, the man took another wild swing but Subaru caught the stroke with the skull of one of the corpses he carried. The blade caught inside the bone and Subaru lightly tossed the corpse onto the bandit, splattering him with the blood and brains of his former comrade. The bandit was driven to the ground screaming. Subaru dropped the other corpse.

The remaining bandits gaped in Subaru in sheer horror and they turned as one to stampede out the great gate of the palisade.

Subaru made a beckoning gesture with one finger and from deep within him he felt something pulse in answer. Moved by no hand, the great gate of the palisade quickly swung shut trapping all the bandits inside.

Hm. Interesting. How did I do that?

The bandits all pushed and beat on the great gate, demanding and imploring it to move. However the gate had been sealed by the Authority of Pride and the strong men couldn't even make the gate budge.

Finally accepting the futility of their actions, the bandits looked back at Subaru with cringing whimpers.

Subaru stared at them with dead eyes, "I did not give you leave to go," He chided gently.

The bandits scattered from the gate, howling in despair and searching for refuge within the tiny enclosed slave camp.

The other bandit had finally fought his way out from underneath the lifeless corpse. He leapt to his feet frantically trying to wipe off the blood and brains. He turned to run but Subaru neatly plucked him off the ground by his belt and dropped him. The bandit hit the ground with an impact that knocked the wind out of him.

The bandit tried to get to his feet, "Wait! Don't! Listen to me, please-"

Subaru covered the bandit's mouth with his hand silencing him, "Please, stop," Subaru sighed as the bandit's eyes bugged out in terror, "You are beginning to make me tired. This is *my* moment, not yours and you are becoming intrusive with your pointless gibbering. If it were not for my remarkable equanimity, I think that I might have become angry with you."

Subaru squeezed his hand and the bandit's head popped like a grape spurting blood and pulp everywhere.

Subaru's face was struck by a glut of blood which he wiped away with irritation. He looked down at his now bloody clothes in annoyance. "Must you?" Subaru demanded of the headless corpse in exasperation, "Spilling your fluids on me in this fashion was rather petty of you, was it not?"

Not far away, Emilia paced outside the wagon waiting for Subaru to return.

Beatrice was sitting on the driver's platform, cuddling Puck.

Suddenly both spirits gasped and turned to look through the forest in the same direction that Subaru had gone.

"What is it?" Emilia demanded.

The spirits didn't answer. They just keep looking through the trees in shock.

"Bubby," Beatrice whispered.

"I know, Betty, I feel it too!"

"What's happening?" Emilia shouted.

The spirits both glanced at her and then returned to peering through the trees. Emilia thought that they weren't going to answer her but then Puck murmured, "It's Subaru."

"Is he in trouble?!"

There was a silence.

Puck didn't even sound aware that he was speaking, "We've been monitoring him since he left. For a while his emotions were... unstable," Puck whispered, "But then something happened and I felt his magical power surge higher and higher to unimaginable levels."

"Is he fighting someone? Is someone trying to hurt him? Is he in danger?!" Emilia demanded.

Beatrice just stared through the trees in open mouthed shock, "What in the world could hurt *him*, I suppose?"

Subaru strolled through the camp as a man might wander a garden. He searched the area killing every slaver he found.

Some men joined together and attempted to attack Subaru. They fought with the ferocity of the desperate until he broke them apart like overripe fruit.

Most had tried to seek out some hiding place or lay there groveling for mercy until Subaru ended them.

After a dozen or so kills, however, Subaru began to become bored.

I understand that the primary purpose of this activity is to administer justice to those meriting it and to protect those in my land who so wisely seek my protection but this casual butchery is an affront to my sensibilities. Is it not beneath me? Even the smallest and crudest of actions should be ennobled by my participation in them. After all, regardless of the specific action being performed, it is simply unfathomable that any other could perform it so well. Perhaps I ought to explore ways to do better.

Thus, Subaru began to seek out a sense of artistry in his violence.

He caught a sniveling bandit and ripped his rib cage wide open.

Fascinating, Subaru mused as the still living bandit writhed in his grip screaming in agony. *I've seen pictures of the organs of the human body, but viewing it like this gives a new appreciation for the delicate machinery that sustains human life.*

That said, it is also really quite messy. My machines are much cleaner.

On impulse, Subaru reached into the man's chest cavity and wrapped his hand around his frantically beating heart. The

man's head whipped back and forth in furious denial as Subaru calmly pulled the beating organ free and held it in his hand.

The man's body fell lifelessly to the ground as Subaru watched in fascination as the organ rapidly stopped beating.

Remarkable. There truly is an artistry to the end of life. I must ponder this more deeply.

Subaru hummed a little tune to himself as he wandered the camp.

Not long after, Subaru had slaughtered everyone in the camp except for the former slaves. They remained hidden inside the large building, cowering and weeping.

He returned to the slaves in good humor. However, as soon as he entered the room, they all screamed, piling as deep into the corner of the room as they could.

"Please don't kill us!" Ellen begged. She was one of the oldest women there but her eyes were so wide with terror that she looked like a child.

Subaru cocked his head, "I hadn't planned to. Have any of you done something that would warrant death?"

All the slaves shook their heads violently.

"I need some water to clean up," Subaru murmured observing his bloody hands and clothes with distaste, "Does anyone know where I can find some?"

The slaves were silent but Ellen pointed a trembling hand toward the bed. Subaru stepped around the bed and found a basin filled with clean water sitting on a night table. He began to wash his hands and rinse off his robes.

The slaves watched in stunned silence.

Ellen swallowed hard, "Are... are you our new owner?"

"No," Subaru replied in a musing voice, as if she had asked him if he liked almonds, "I am here to set you all free."

A faint light of hope gleamed in the woman's eye.

"I hope that none of you find this overly upsetting," Subaru said regretfully, "I understand that entering into my service would be a honor undreamed of to most of you. However, accepting slaves into my household would be strictly beneath the dignity of a great lord such as myself. I hope that you can understand."

The slaves all stared at Subaru in stunned silence.

When Subaru had cleaned himself and his robes to satisfaction he turned toward the women. They flinched back as if menaced by a raised fist.

"Do any of you need to gather possessions or supplies before departing?" He asked solicitously.

Ellen stared at him, "We... We don't have any possessions. But... maybe we could gather some food?" She asked cringing.

"Seems sensible," Subaru agreed, "Why don't you ladies gather your supplies and then meet me outside. I wish to ensure that none of these slavers escaped my good justice. Such gross errors would doubtlessly place me in a foul mood."

Subaru walked out of the building into the bloody and flyblown courtyard.

The Authority of Pride flows within me, He mused. I can feel it pulsing deep in my chest like an extra heartbeat. A source of unimaginable power that freely offers me its blessing. Roswaal said that it had been searching for me for centuries. It must be simply euphoric to have finally submitted to its rightful master. This is merely the beginning. There are far deeper powers to tap. I can sense it. Bit by bit, I must cast off this same old sickly skin and dedicate myself body and soul to the search for transcendence. My quest for perfection continues apace.

The world around him froze but Subaru hadn't triggered *Reason and Judgment*. He had just enough time to wonder what was going on before Subaru sensed a new word engraved on his mind and his heart: *Pridebreaker*.

As Subaru pondered this revelation, the extra heartbeat slowed and began to still. The great magic surging through him cut off.

The Authority of Pride returned to dormancy.

He became Subaru Natsuki again.

Subaru gasped, clasping a hand to his mouth as he looked around the courtyard in horror. Bodies were everywhere but you could barely tell that most of them had ever been human. Some had been reduced to little more than hamburger meat and protruding clumps of bone. The flies were gathering around them and small streams of blood and pulp flowed lazily across the courtyard.

Oh my God! What the fuck did I do?! Why... How... What happened?! I...

Subaru looked down at his trembling hands that had literally ripped human bodies apart.

He fell to his knees, his entire body shaking.

Subaru retched and then threw up, regurgitating the only good meal he'd had all week.

He knelt there in the dirt, his trembling arms barely keeping him from falling face first into his own vomit.

A moment later his stomach clenched and heaved, turning itself inside out and forcing everything he'd eaten in the past few days back up his already raw and abraded throat.

There was nothing left inside of him but he keep throwing up. Spitting and coughing out thin streams of bile as if trying to squeeze out the memories of what he had done.

Finally his stomach was just too exhausted to push any further and Subaru fell back against the wall of the building crying piteously.

He pulled his knees to his chest and crumpled into a ball, weeping.

"Oh God!" He wailed.

Some time later the women approached Subaru where he lay crumpled against the wall just inside the building.

"Are you alright?" Ellen asked the shell-shocked Subaru in concern.

Subaru sniffled and, bracing himself against the wall, slowly fought his way back to his feet. "I've had... better days," Subaru admitted.

Subaru took a deep breath and tried to pull himself back together. "Alright, is everyone ready to leave?"

"Yes, my lord," Ellen replied.

Subaru flinched, "Ellen, please, *please*, do not call me that!" He moaned.

Ellen blinked, "Um, of course. What would you like us to call you?"

"I don't care," Subaru said too numb to think, "Just not that."

The slaves began to murmur in confusion at the massive change that had occurred in this formerly terrifying man.

Subaru shook his head and pushed aside his horror by sheer will, "OK. Listen, there is some," Subaru groped for a description, "Very ugly stuff outside. Can all of the younger girls take the hands of one older buddy, please?"

The youngest girls all grabbed the hands of an older teen or adult. Except for one girl who took the hand of a friend who might have been a year older than her. "OK, *that* is not what I meant," Subaru called them out.

Two of the older ladies separated the pair.

Subaru took a deep breath, "OK, like I was saying," Subaru continued painfully, "There is some very very ugly stuff outside. Young people don't need to see that. So I want everyone to cover their younger buddy's eyes until we get out of the camp."

"Good idea," Ellen agreed covering the eyes of the girl beside her.

"And if anyone wants to cover my eyes," Subaru whispered to himself, "I'd really appreciate it."

Subaru took a painful breath, "Alright. Let's all get the hell out of this sewer."

Subaru was momentarily worried that he couldn't open the palisade gate after it had been sealed by the Authority of Pride but it opened easily at his touch and with the help of a few of the slaves, he pushed it wide open and they all escaped from that slaughterhouse.

Subaru led the women back toward the road feeling completely numb. The horror of what he'd done in that camp kept rising up and threatening to choke him. Subaru fought to push it down because he knew that if he let himself feel the horror, he'd only collapse and start weeping all over again.

The only thought in his mind was to get back to Emilia. Only her presence could even begin to calm the horrors he had experienced.

I think I'm in for a disappointment though. I really want to collapse in Emilia's arms and just cry until I pass out but we're running for our goddamn lives so that sure as hell isn't an option. And it's not like I can talk to her about it either. I can't even imagine telling Mili what I just did!

Oh, fuck! It's even worse than I thought! The Lagunican authorities are absolutely going to come investigate this. As soon as any of these women figure out who I am, the authorities will see the slaughter I made of those slavers as just more evidence that I'm under Emilia's spell! Because of course 'Subaru Natsuki the brave and bold who always eats his

vegetables' would never descend into mindless butchery like this unless he was under a witch's spell. The unbelievable irony of it is that all of my friends are trying to rescue someone who is an honest-to-god witch from Emilia!

OK, hang on. Maybe it's not all that bad. These women have no idea who I am so they can't report me by name. Why would anyone think that Subaru Natsuki had anything to do with this mess? I'm not supposed to be anywhere near here. The women will report a strange man saved them and... rendered the slavers down into soup stock.

Subaru gaged and struggled not to throw up again.

"You know," Ellen murmured walking beside him, "I think I understand how you feel."

"Is that right?" Subaru almost laughed glancing at Ellen. She was the only one willing to walk with him. She carried a young girl on her back. The rest of the former slaves were following Subaru from some distance behind them.

Ellen nodded, "I killed Ayane," She said.

Subaru looked at her in confusion, "I'm not sure that you should feel bad about that."

"I know. I don't and I do," Ellen admitted, "Ayane sold me and my daughter into slavery. I might never see her again," Ellen's voice shook.

"You'll find her!" Subaru tried to reassure Ellen.

"I hope so," Ellen bit her lip. She shook her head, "I wanted Ayane dead. I was euphoric while we were killing her but afterward when I looked down on that thing that used to be a human body..."

"You wanted to throw up," Subaru said sagely.

Ellen sighed, "You've been there, I see."

"I spend most of my time there, Ellen. I'm thinking about buying a house there just to save on the commute," Subaru grumbled.

Ellen managed a chuckle.

They walked in silence for a few moments.

"Um... Mister, what's going to happen to us?" Ellen asked.

Subaru sighed, "Well, mostly that's up to you. There's an inn down the road a ways where I think you can get help. I'll give you some gold to buy food and shelter for all of you and hopefully a ride back toward the capitol. I'd suggest you all go and talk to the authorities there. They can probably help you. Maybe even help you find where the others were sent."

"Mister, if you don't mind my asking, why did you save us? I mean, I'm eternally grateful for you rescuing us, we all are, but why?" Ellen asked.

Subaru gave her an incredulous look, "Why did I rescue a group of slaves and murder a pack of filthy slavers? Hm. That's a hard one," He snorted, "If you have to ask the question, Ellen, then I don't think you'll understand the answer."

"I see. Thank you, Mister. From the bottom of my heart," Ellen replied.

"You're welcome," He sighed.

Subaru led the group of slaves back to the wagon where Emilia and the spirits waited.

"Subaru, are you alright?" Emilia yelled running over to meet him then stopping to stare at the women emerging from the forest in confusion.

"Subaru!" Ellen whispered staring at him in shock, "Subaru Natsuki?! The invincible?"

Subaru was aghast to see that Emilia had forgotten to pull up her hood.

Nice. Good job telling everybody my name, Mili. Also, nice touch completely forgetting to cover up your hair and ears that you know make you a walking target! Oh my fucking God, Emilia, I love you to bits and pieces but do you ever think before you act?! Now the entire Kingdom is going to know where we are and come after us! Plus now everyone will know about the fucking graveyard I left behind in that place!

Fuck me, I'm a Goddamn idiot and so is Emilia!

Subaru quickly shook off his frustration with Emilia knowing that it wasn't fair to her.

Oh my God, I'm exhausted. I don't know if I can take another step...

"I'm fine," Subaru sighed, "These ladies have had a pretty tough time of it though."

The women saw Emilia's silver hair and pointed ears and began to murmur among themselves.

Subaru turned to face Ellen, "If you walk down this road a ways, you'll find an inn run by a woman named Fran. She seems to be alright," Subaru took out thirty gold coins from his pouch and handed them to Ellen who stared at him in

amazement, "She should be able to give you food and shelter and you can buy a trip down to the capitol. Tell your story to the authorities there. I'm sure they can help you reunite with your loved ones."

"Lord Subaru-" Ellen whispered.

"You don't have to call me that," Subaru sighed.

I'm pretty sure that any 'lordship' I ever possessed has been completely voided by now anyway.

"You saved our lives. We are eternally in your debt," Ellen said and the women all nodded.

"Forget it," Subaru said with a shake of his head, "Listen, you all better get walking if you hope to get to the inn before dark.

"Subaru," Emilia interrupted ignoring the askance looks of the women, "They should take the wagon."

Subaru stared at her, "What?"

"They need it more than we do," She said simply, "They have young people who can't walk that far. The inn has to be miles away."

"We'll make do, you've already helped us more than enough," Ellen assured them.

Subaru ignored her, "Emilia, we need it too! Have you forgotten? We're running for our lives!"

"What are you running from?" Ellen asked in confusion.

"It's cold up in these mountains, Subaru," Emilia pointed out, "These people are barely dressed and barefoot. If they don't get someplace warm before dark they'll catch frostbite!"

Subaru turned away and pulled at his hair, "Oh God, why am I marrying a woman with a martyr complex?!"

Emilia smiled fondly at Subaru.

Subaru sighed and turned to face the women, "Fine. OK, my lovely bride has decided that you get the wagon. It's getting late in the day so you should probably get moving. We *definitely* need to get moving," Subaru muttered to Emilia who nodded.

Subaru turned back to the slaves, "Does anyone know how far the border is from here?" He asked them.

The women all shook their heads.

"Great," Subaru sighed walking toward the back of the wagon, "Alright family, lets grab our stuff and get out of here."

Subaru pulled on his backpack and handed Emilia hers.

"You did a good thing, Subaru," Emilia assured him.

"No, *you* did a good thing," He grumbled, "I just stood by and let you do it."

Emilia picked up the tent bag and Subaru lifted Beatrice onto his shoulder.

The former slaves piled into the wagon.

"Our thanks to... both of you," The leader said looking at Emilia nervously, "I'll never forget my debt to either of you." She pulled herself onto the driver's platform and drove the earth dragons back down the road with practiced skill.

Subaru sighed, rubbing his trembling legs. "Alright, let's get walking. We want to get very far away from here before those girls tell everybody all about us."

"Subaru, not to point fingers, but we wouldn't have had that problem if you hadn't told them your name," Emilia said.

Subaru bit his lip. *Calm down, Subaru. Yelling at Emilia won't accomplish anything.*

"How many silver haired half elves have you met?" Subaru asked calmly, "You didn't even have your hood up when we came back. Trust me, the authorities would have figured out who we were pretty quickly."

Emilia flushed and started to pout, "You didn't know I had my hood down when you told them your name!" She argued.

Subaru's frustrations over the past few days suddenly flared up, "Emilia! I *didn't* tell them my name, *you* told them my name! You shouted it out at them the moment we came out of the woods! Plus you left your hood down so they all just had to look at you to realize that there was a 'witch' around! Everyone knows exactly where we are because you didn't think!"

Emilia looked stricken and she stared down at her feet ashamed.

Good work, Subaru. You fucking asshole. Maybe you could beat on her a little more? See if you can undermine her self-esteem just a bit further? The day's not over yet, you know.

"Can we argue over whose fault this is another time, I suppose? Regardless of why they find us, an awful lot of people

are after us and Betty would like to get far away from here," Beatrice said.

"As usual, Beako, you're probably right," Subaru admitted, "Hey, Beako, how long did we sleep in the wagon?"

"Hm. Perhaps three hours I suppose," She answered.

"OK so maybe we went twenty to thirty miles from the inn," Subaru mused.

"How close does that put us to the border?" Emilia asked in a somber voice.

"Tough to say exactly," Subaru murmured, "I think we were two or three days away when we left the inn. The wagon ride might have given us a little more than the equivalent of a full day's walk."

"So we're almost there!" Emilia cheered up.

"Yeah," Subaru agreed, "But I have a funny feeling that we're going to need to walk late tonight."

Emilia sighed wearily.

They began walking up the hilly road.

"Subaru, how much money do we have left?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged, "I think about two hundred gold pieces."

"Is that a lot?"

Subaru raised an eyebrow.

Emilia shrugged, "I mostly just bartered for the things I needed when I lived in the forest. I never really had coins."

"Two hundred gold coins is a lot. It's probably more than most peasants would see in a lifetime but we're giving it away pretty quickly," Subaru replied.

It was mid afternoon. They had been walking since the former slaves left through a chilly evergreen forest in the mountain foothills. They paused briefly to eat lunch and then continued walking.

Subaru's legs begged for rest. The only good part of this was that the throbbing pain was a distraction from reflecting on what had happened at the slave camp. Subaru and Emilia were both exhausted so they didn't talk much. However it took Subaru a while to notice how quiet the spirits had been.

Subaru looked at Puck and Beatrice with concern. They had been sitting on his shoulder the entire walk but they hadn't said anything.

"You guys seem awfully quiet today," He murmured.

Beatrice held Puck close to her chest. The look she gave Subaru was filled with misgivings, "Subaru, what happened in that camp?"

Emilia immediately perked up and listened closely.

Subaru sighed, "Bad things, Beako. A *lot* of bad things. I knew it was going to be ugly there which is why I didn't want any of you to have to see it. Those men..." Subaru shook his head, "You know, I just hope that there's a special place in hell for people like that."

"That's all well and good, I suppose," Beatrice replied, "But Betty was talking about you!"

"Me?" Subaru asked uncomfortably.

"Yeah, Subaru," Puck jumped in. "What happened to you in there? I felt your magic grow and grow and become overwhelming. I've never felt anything like it! What happened?"

Subaru kept walking, chewing over his answer. He sighed, "I think... I think maybe I finally connected with my Authority. At least for a while."

"Is that a good thing?" Emilia asked in a carefully neutral voice.

"Maybe. It could certainly be a useful thing," Subaru replied with a shrug, "That said, I don't know how I did it. I haven't been able to do again."

"Subaru," Beatrice muttered, "Betty is worried."

"Worried?"

Beatrice shook his head, "Bubby could feel you while you were at the camp, Subaru. Betty doesn't know what you were doing there but Bubby could feel you becoming... dark."

Subaru nodded a little shamefaced, "Yeah, I guess I can't argue with that. The things I saw in that camp... Well, let's just say that they really affected me in a bad way. I tried to keep you all far away from it but I forgot that we're

connected at our souls now and that my emotions affect you. I'm very sorry you both had to deal with it. I should have done a better job protecting you."

Beatrice shook her head violently, "That is *not* what Betty and Bubby are saying, in fact!"

"We love you, Subaru," Puck agreed, "Whatever the problem, whatever the danger, we'll stand with you and look it in the face. You don't have to do everything all by yourself!"

"Listen to Puck, Subaru," Emilia said quietly.

Subaru shook his head weary right down to his bones.

"I just," Subaru sighed, "I just want us all to get somewhere safe where we can lick our wounds. I don't know how much longer I can handle all of this. The thought of one of you, *any* of you, being hurt or being taken away from me just... I'd just want to die."

Puck nodded, "We feel the same way, Subaru."

"Betty and Subaru belong together. It was a promise," Beatrice agreed.

Subaru stopped and briefly rested his head against Beatrice's side. Cuddling against the two spirits as best he could from this position, "I'm sorry for putting you all through this. It'll be over soon and then we can all take a nice break."

Puck flashed him a smile, "We'll hang in there with you, Subaru. We're with you right to the end."

Subaru chuckled and his eyes started to tear up, "I can't imagine what I'd do without you guys," He said in a thick voice.

Subaru coughed and recovered himself. He flashed the spirits a grin, "But I do suppose my back would appreciate carrying less weight all the time," He joked.

Subaru turned his face away as the two spirits, pretending to be angry, began to poke and slap at him.

Subaru smiled until his gaze fell on Emilia standing forlorn a short distance away, watching the loving family that she was now excluded from by the curse. Staring at two of the three people in the world most precious to her, who were now only tolerating her begrudgingly.

Subaru swallowed hard and extended his hand to Emilia.

She took it with a weak smile and they continued walking.

The sun was going down. This far north and up in the mountains it got cold at night even in the spring.

Subaru was musing over what he'd discovered in the camp today. It was better than thinking about what he'd *done* there.

Pridebreaker. I wonder what that does. Also, I'm not sure if Pridebreaker is a great name for an ability granted by the Authority of Pride or an ironic one.

So I gained a new power of some kind? So that suggests that my bond with my Authority got stronger. Its power certainly seemed to be flowing through me today in a way I've never experienced before. It felt great...maybe even a little too good. But the question becomes: why? What made my bond with the Authority stronger and how do I do it again if I need to? I keep trying to reconnect with the Authority but it's not working. Nothing has changed about Indomitable and Reason and Judgment once again freezes the world.

What was it about the situation in the slaver's camp that made me connect with the Authority? I didn't feel like I was being especially proud before the Authority... started doing whatever it did and made me drunk on it. I think I just felt... how to explain it? Conviction? Certainty? Righteous indignation? A hunger for justice? What does any of that have to do with pride?

Or does the Authority just really hate slavers and so it rewarded me for killing some of them? Honestly, that might be nice because I think I could make killing slaves my hobby with just a little bit of encouragement.

Damn... did I just say that? I mean, I totally believe that all slavers deserve to die but... being intrigued by the thought of killing is pretty unusual for me...

OK, well that's all secondary, right now the most important question is: What does Pridebreaker do?

Subaru glanced at Emilia who held his hand and Beatrice who rode on his shoulder with Puck in her arms.

Alright, important safety tip: Do not trigger a completely unknown magic when my family is at ground zero for whatever it's going to do.

Subaru shivered violently. The night was becoming chill.

"Mili, I'd like to keep walking but I'm worried that maybe we need to make camp. It's getting really cold out," Subaru said.

"It is?" Emilia asked.

Subaru looked at Emilia, Beatrice, and Puck and realized that he was the only one shivering.

"Our mana keeps us warm," Beatrice answered his unspoken question, "Subaru needs to learn how to do this, I suppose."

"Sounds great," Subaru replied, "Can you teach me?"

Beatrice rubbed her lower lip, "Betty isn't sure. Subaru has a great deal of mana but it behaves funny."

"Funny how?"

"It's the exact opposite of normal mana, I suppose."

"Beako, that answer didn't help me understand it at all," Subaru complained.

"Don't blame Betty, in fact! Betty's Subaru does not perceive mana. Perhaps *you* could explain the difference between colors to someone who's blind, I suppose!" She sulked.

"Fair point," Subaru sighed. He shook his head, "OK, let's see if we can find a campsite. I think we'll want a fire tonight and that means we need to find a place where we can hide it."

"I think I might be able to use magic to heat our tent," Emilia offered.

"OK, that sounds promising! Um, how confident are you that you can control this magic?" Subaru asked.

Emilia rocked her hand back and forth uncertainly.

"In that case, maybe we should practice that spell another night. This is the only tent we've got, Mili."

They found a sheltered glen where they were out of sight of the road and the group spread out to gather firewood.

After about half an hour in the bitter cold they'd located enough wood to stay warm for the night and they returned to the tent.

"Hey guys, before we call it a night there's something I want to try," Subaru said.

"What's that, Subaru?" Emilia asked.

"I think... I might have a new magical ability," Subaru explained.

"What does it do?" Beatrice asked excitedly.

"I dunno. I haven't tried it yet," Subaru shrugged.

"When did you get it?" Emilia asked.

Subaru blanched and ignored her.

"Anyway, I'm going to try to use it," Subaru said walking a fair distance away from the tent and turning his back on his family.

Being far away and facing away from everyone should make them safer. Gee, I really hope that this Pridebreaker thing doesn't make fireballs shoot out of my back, Subaru mused.

The wind was picking up. Subaru took a deep breath and triggered *Pridebreaker*.

He felt the power sweep out of him in a great wave. The sound of the wind became muted. Actually all sounds became faint and quiet but Subaru didn't sense anything else.

Subaru turned around to look at Emilia and saw the three of them looking puzzled.

Well, nothing seems to be happening here. Maybe I should try to hit something. Or be hit by something.

Huh. The other thing is that whatever this Pridebreaker thing is, it's got a seriously long recharge timer. I can feel it. No idea how long until I can use it again but I guess that's not a huge problem since I don't know what it does in the first place. I'll need to have a better experiment prepared to try and test it when it finally comes off cooldown.

Actually I'm not even sure if Pridebreaker's 'effect' is over or if it's still going on.

Subaru shrugged and walked back over to the group, "Well, that was anti-climatic," Subaru sighed, "Anybody notice anything? I have no idea what it did, if it did anything."

"Maybe you should try using it again," Emilia suggested.

"Can't. I don't know how long I have to wait before I can use it again but it's going to be a while. Definitely not tonight," Subaru sighed, "Did anyone notice anything?"

Emilia rubbed her chin, "Subaru, the spirits have all left," She murmured.

Subaru looked at Beatrice and Puck in confusion.

"Not them, Subaru," Emilia shook her head, "The lesser spirits. All the spirits in a wide area fled when you used that power."

"Did you guys feel anything?" Subaru asked Beatrice and Puck.

Beatrice folded her arms looking frustrated, "You did... something. Betty felt it but she can't figure out what you did because it didn't affect Betty. It might not affect Subaru's allies, I suppose."

"Those spirits were terrified, Subaru," Puck added, "I've never seen spirits so freaked out. They always tend to be afraid of Betty and me but those spirits raced out of here like they were being chased by a terrible monster and I think some of them might still be running."

Subaru shrugged, "So... maybe it's some kind of anti-spirit magic? I doubt that will be too useful," He sighed.

"Do not try to use Betty as target practice, in fact!" Beatrice cried.

"Nope, Beako is way too cute to be target practice. Well, alright let's get inside and get some sleep. With the wind picking up like this there's probably no point to starting a fire anymore."

Late that night, Garfiel, Felt, and Crusch were looking at the map.

Felix came rushing in, "Crusch, we just got news sent magically from a garrison!"

"What is it?"

Felix walked over to the map and grabbed a red pin, "Subaru and the witch have been sighted here!" Felix pushed the pin into the map, "Almost directly north of the capitol."

"The fuck?" Garfiel yelled, "We've totally been looking in the wrong place!"

"The hell is the boss doing all the way over there?" Felt asked, "That's the middle of frigging nowhere!"

"I'm guessing he plans to cross the border into Gusteko," Crusch muttered, "That's probably been his plan all along," She shook her head with a snarl.

"Huh?" Felt asked.

Crusch gave her an angry look, "Think about it! He's a man on foot who managed to stay ahead of an army of trained scouts and experienced trackers. How? Because he kept leading my troops through dense forests where the riding earth dragons couldn't go and the surge in mabeasts required them to stay in larger groups for their own safety. He forced us to pursue him on foot and reduced our ability to search because we couldn't spread out! That nullified our advantage of having a large and well equipped army! I kept wondering why he went to Arlem. He did it because the path to the border was wide open territory with no cover where the scouts would have found him easily! By appearing in Arlem he forced me to redeploy all of my forces southernly and left him a clear path through the eastern grasslands and up to the border! He just wanted to confuse me and to keep moving my scouts around to leave the border lightly defended! Subaru Natsuki has outsmarted me again!" Crusch roared slamming her fist down on the map.

"Crusch, what would the witch want in Gusteko?" Felix asked.

Crusch scowled at the map. "It's possible that they just want to get out of the country for a while," She suggested, "The army can't follow him anywhere close to the border without risking an international incident and Reinhard can't cross the border either."

"Crusch, what are we going to do? We can't get any significant troops there in a reasonable amount of time, nya," Felix said, "We only have a few riding dragons."

"We can send a few people on the dragons though," Crusch mused.

"I'm going!" Garfiel asserted.

"Me too," Felt agreed.

Crusch ignored them, "Reinhard might be able to catch up with him before he crosses the border," Crusch mused, "He should be here soon."

"Reinhard needs to rest tonight!" Felt said flatly, "End of discussion! I'm not going to let him die from exhaustion! You will not tell him about this intelligence until dawn, understand me?!"

Crusch scowled, "If the witch crosses the border-"

"Then she's another country's problem!" Felt spat back.

The two women glowered at each other.

"Uh," Garfiel cleared his throat, "So what else was in the report, Felix?"

"Apparently, Subaru located a camp of slavers and killed most of them and then freed their slaves. According to the report, at the witch's urging he gave them the wagon that they were using and some gold and sent them back to Lagunica while Subaru and the witch continued on foot. The garrison was led to the camp by one of the former slaves and they located dozens of corpses, several of which the officers described as looking like they were torn apart by wild animals," Felix replied watching as Crusch and Felt continued to glare at each other, "They also located the partially decayed body of Duke Osril."

Crusch finally looked away from Felt and stared at Felix. Felix nodded and Crusch shook her head with a disgusted face.

"Who's Duke Osril?" Felt grumbled.

"A lecher of the worst kind, a profound hater and abuser of women, whose rank has too long allowed him to escape punishment," Crusch replied.

"Well, luckily the Captain got his hands on him," Garfiel smirked.

"I never suspected that Osril was involved in the slave trade but neither am I terribly surprised. The world is well rid of him," Crusch sighed. She drummed her fingers on the map for a moment, "Very well. First thing tomorrow we will send Reinhard van Astrea to attempt to head off Subaru Natsuki. This is our last chance."

"If we have riding dragons, then I'm going too!" Garfiel asserted, "The dragons might not be able to keep up with Red but if he runs into the Captain I want to be close by."

Crusch looked darkly at Garfiel.

"I'm going too," Felt murmured.

This made Crusch feel better. Felt could certainly keep Garfiel under control, "It's late, it's time that we all retired for the night," Crusch said.

Crusch Karnstein had readied for bed and was nursing a glass of wine before retiring.

Felix sat next to her.

"Crusch, what do you think we need to do about Subaru and the witch, nya?" Felix asked.

Crusch swirled her glass and stared at the wine's color, "Our situation has not improved, Felix," Crusch murmured, "Captain Falric's life was directly threatened by Subaru Natsuki. Subaru promised to kill Falric if he should try to attack the witch but the Captain still refuses to even consider the idea that Subaru might be working with the witch of his own accord. When I attempted to broach the subject, Falric was so shocked that I needed to pretend he had misunderstood me."

"In all fairness, Crusch, Falric's report said that Subaru warned him he would die if he tried to attack the witch. He might have assumed Subaru was actually trying to warn him that he had no chance against her," Felix replied.

"Naturally. That makes perfect sense if you're engaged in motivated reasoning," Crusch sighed. "That's the problem, Felix. Nobody wants to consider the possibility that maybe Subaru Natsuki isn't really the good guy he seemed to be. Everyone is bending over backwards to try to explain what's going on without implicating Subaru as a conspirator. This means that instead of trying to track them down and kill them, people are focusing on trying to protect and rescue Subaru. This is a crippling limitation in our operation. I'm guessing that is why Subaru Natsuki is making sure to do so many good deeds as he flees. He wants people to be indecisive about confronting him."

"I received word from the sage's council today about our latest report," Felix said awkwardly.

"And?" Crusch asked.

"The council was," Felix hesitated, "Somewhat skeptical of our concerns. They don't believe that Witch of Envy is free. They claim this is just another Witch scare and they refused to declare a state of emergency without evidence. We have been ordered to maintain the information of Subaru Natsuki being missing as classified. The council believes that Subaru may have been abducted by the Witch Cult and the hero of land being abducted by them could cause a panic."

Crusch shook her head, "Wise fools," She said draining her glass.

"Crusch, we need to find proof of Subaru deliberately working together with the witch, nya. That's the only way to revive your campaign for the throne, Crusch," Felix said.

"The hell with my campaign," Crusch shook her head, "We need to think about the fate of the world. The Witch of Envy nearly ended the entire world before and it's only a matter of time before she tries to do so again."

"Maybe not, Crusch, nya," Felix replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know why yet but all the evidence suggest that the Witch is working for Subaru Natsuki. That suggests that her magic would only be utilized to further his goals. He won't want the world destroyed, he'd just want to rule it, nya."

"Is that supposed to be better?" Crusch asked.

Felix thought for a moment, "That is better, Crusch. Empirically," He replied.

"Point taken," Crusch admitted, "Regardless it is a choice of evils, both of which should be avoided." She drummed her fingers on the her chair, "Felix, we will have to take care of this situation ourselves."

"What do you mean, nya?"

"Our odds of convincing anyone of Subaru Natsuki's treachery are vanishing down to a very low order of probability. Therefore, we'll need to clean up this mess personally. You, me, and my personal guard. They'll listen to reason and follow instruction."

Felix frowned, "Then we hunt down the witch ourselves?"

"Yes. We have limited resources if we restrict ourselves to our own faction but we'd still have the best trained and equipped men in the kingdom at our side. We track down the Witch and we eliminate her."

"And what about Subaru Natsuki, nya? Would he suffer an 'accident?'"

Crusch looked at Felix with annoyance, "Felix, I am not an assassin."

"You're also not very realistic, Crusch," Felix retorted, "If you attack the witch then Subaru will absolutely try to stop you. We'll all need to be prepared to treat him as a hostile combatant. If Subaru was bewitched then killing her *might* break the spell but it might not. If Subaru is not bewitched, and we somehow captured him alive, imagine how that would play out. Remember, Crusch, nobody except us, Subaru's companions, and maybe Captain Falric really believes that this girl is the Witch of Envy and Subaru Natsuki will be going around assuring everyone that she was not. A few hints that you killed an innocent woman with an unfortunate appearance whom Subaru had helped escape from the clutches of the Cult, Crusch. That's all it would take."

Crusch scowled, "Very well. We will deal with the situation as we must. The Witch is and remains the target. Depending on the outcome, Subaru Natsuki... may need to be sacrificed."

Subaru stared up at the tent ceiling. He couldn't sleep. The spirits lay on top of him and Emilia dozed beside him.

I can't believe the things that were going on at that slaver camp. I can't even understand it. What kind of person could look another human being in the eye and treat them like a thing?

If I had been the one who locked those girls up in cages, I would not be OK. Hell, I'd be lucky if I could ever sleep again.

And Ayane... she was a baited trap. She tricked people over and over again into slavery for a little money. She deserved to die.

What I did at the camp felt... very different to what happened when I killed the Gusteko soldiers or even the cultists.

Those men were slavers. They were evil on a level I can't even comprehend. I might just take Ley and Roy over a slaver.

I'm glad that they're dead. But... I can't help but think that there was something wrong about the way I did it.

If I'd been in a rage, hunting them down in a fit of righteous indignation then what I did would be understandable, maybe not admirable but understandable. Instead... I fell under the Authority's spell and started killing them because... they offended me. They offended my sensibilities. I didn't just kill them. I ripped them apart. I killed them with a studied detachment and felt nothing. I even killed some of them to satisfy my own curiosity.

What's happening to me? What's this Authority doing to me?

"Subaru, are you still awake?" Emilia whispered.

"Yeah," Subaru whispered. He paused, "Emilia, I'm really sorry about yelling at you earlier."

She sighed, "No, you were right. If it hadn't been for me, we'd all be home free. Instead, I was careless and soon everyone will know right where we are." She closed her eyes, "I put everyone I care about in danger. Again."

"We've both been under a ton of pressure lately. We're going to slip up," Subaru mused, "I'm sorry that I took my frustration out on you. You didn't deserve that."

They were both quiet a moment.

"Subaru, I can tell that something is bothering you. What happened to you in the camp?" She asked, "What happened to those girls?"

Subaru was silent for a moment, "I don't want to tell you," He whispered.

"I can handle it, Subaru," Emilia replied.

"Can you? I'm not so sure that I can," Subaru said.

"Subaru! You told me that I proved myself in the Sanctuary," Emilia whispered sounding slightly offended.

"You did but this is different," Subaru murmured.

"No, Subaru, it isn't," Emilia said, "I can feel how much it hurt you. I want to carry that burden with you."

"What sense does that make? If something hurts me you want it to hurt you too? How does it help for us both to be in pain?" Subaru snorted.

Emilia was silent for a moment, "Subaru, do you not want talk about it because it won't make you feel better or because you're trying to protect me?"

Subaru mulled it over, "I don't know. Both?"

Emilia was quiet for a time. "Subaru, do you remember what you told the spirits today? Well... I think that you and I are connected at our souls too and your emotions affect me. I want to help you you feel better even if it makes me feel worse. Wouldn't you do the same?"

"Mili," Subaru said after a moment, "Do you think you could do me a favor tonight, please?"

"What?" Emilia asked.

"Could you just... hold me for a little while?" Subaru whispered.

Emilia looked Subaru in shock and then nodded.

Subaru laid his head down on Emilia breast and began to cry as she stroked his hair.

"It's alright, Subaru," She whispered, "As long as we're together, everything will be OK."

The next morning, Subaru and company broke their camp and continued moving north along the road.

About mid morning they heard a wagon approaching them from the north. It was driven by a fat man with a long white beard. Subaru waved him down.

The man came to a stop, "Sorry mate, I don't take passengers," The man said with an apologetic shrug.

"That's alright. We're going the other way, anyway," Subaru replied, "Can you tell us how far to Orcos?"

"On foot?" The driver said dubiously, "I'd guess three or four days."

"OK, and how far to the border?"

"Two days," He answered.

"Any inns or places to stay in between here and the city?" Subaru asked.

"Yeah, Maude runs a pretty nice one right across the border."

"Great, thanks for your help, sir," Subaru said with a wave.

"Safe journey," The man said driving off.

Subaru sighed, "I really thought we were closer."

"It's still only two days until we're safe," Emilia reminded him, "Four days until we get to the city and, best of all, two days until we can sleep in a nice warm bed!"

"Betty agrees with the elf, in fact. Betty very much misses a bed," Beatrice said.

"We all miss beds," Subaru chuckled at Beatrice, "But Emilia is right, this is the home stretch. Just another day or two and we can finally relax."

"So, Subaru, if we're about to be somewhere safe for a while, what's our next step?" Puck asked.

"Hm?"

"I mean, are we still assuming that something has modified our memories instead of yours?" Puck asked. He still looked at Emilia skeptically but without overt hostility.

Subaru gave Puck a steady look while Emilia glanced away uncomfortably, "Yes, Puck. We are still assuming that," Subaru said patiently.

"OK, so... how are we going to fix it?"

Subaru scratched his chin, "I don't really know yet. I guess the first thing we'll do is start writing letters to Felt and Reinhard and see if we can open up a dialog. After that we'll need to do some research, Beako, do you have any ideas where your mother's other books might be located?"

Beatrice shook her head, "Betty has no idea. The world has changed a great deal since mother's day. It is possible that the location where the books were secured no longer exists, I suppose."

"That's a happy thought," Subaru grumbled, "Well, Orcos looks like a big town. I bet there's a large library there where

we can do research."

"A library?" Beatrice's face lit up.

Subaru chuckled, "I thought that would make your day."

"Subaru," Emilia murmured, "I'm sure that they have libraries in Orcos but how would we get inside?"

"What do you mean?"

"How would we convince one of the local nobles to let us use his library?" She asked.

Subaru thought for a moment and then face palmed, "Shit! You're right! They don't have public libraries in this world!"

"Public libraries?" Beatrice asked.

"It's a big thing where I come from," Subaru sighed. He shook his head, "OK, fine. We'll get to town and then breeze around and find out who has a reputation in the area for being extremely wise and learned. We'll get a meeting with him and... explain that we're servants of Roswaal I guess, and that he sent us here to do research on a strange curse and witchcraft that's affecting someone important."

"Do you really think that they'll believe that?" Emilia asked dubiously.

"It's just a broad outline, Mili. We'll polish it after we learn more about who we're going to be talking to and what things are like in Gusteko. If nothing else, maybe we can find someone to bribe," Subaru shrugged.

"I believe they have some public libraries in Kararagi and Vollachia but I couldn't vouch for their quality, I suppose," Beatrice said.

Subaru shrugged, "Well we'll cross those borders when we come to them. We'll start by just looking for men with a reputation for being wise and educated and go from there. It's possible a little bit of judicious flattery would unlock all the information that we need."

"Betty is skeptical, I suppose. What makes Subaru think that a bit of flattery will persuade someone to share their knowledge with you?" Beatrice asked.

Subaru looked at Beatrice and hid a smile.

The next night they made camp near the foot of a small cliff in the woods to protect them from the wind.

They all spread out to search for firewood. Emilia deliberately followed Puck into the woods.

The flying cat looked around for dry branches.

"You know, Emilia, you might have more luck finding firewood if you didn't search places that I just looked," Puck said not looking at her.

"I know. I was...," Emilia hesitated, "I was just hoping that maybe we could talk."

"What do we have to talk about?"

"I just wanted to talk about Subaru," Emilia said.

Puck sighed and drifted down until he was looking her in the eye. He leaned back and folded his paws across his chest, "Talk."

Emilia took a deep breath, "Puck, I feel terrible about what I did to Subaru and Felt. I am so terribly sorry and ashamed of what I did."

"Yeah, I remember you telling me that. Anything else?" Puck said in a bored tone.

Emilia's face fell. "I... It really was an accident, Puck."

"Of course it was a accident!" Puck snorted, "I knew that the second that you did it!"

Emilia stared at him, "Then why won't you forgive me Puck?"

The little cat shook his head in frustration, "You really just don't get it do you, Emilia? The fact that you did it by accident makes it worse."

Emilia stared at Puck in confusion.

Puck sighed, "Subaru once told me a saying from his world: 'What we most need to fear is not a competent enemy but an incompetent ally.'"

Emilia blinked.

"I knew that you cursed Subaru by accident as soon as you did it. That didn't make me any less angry with you because I love Subaru. But... Subaru loves you. You make him happy. So I've really tried... to accept you, Emilia, but you keep

making it absolutely impossible!" Puck shouted.

"Puck," Emilia whispered.

"You curse my Subaru and you almost kill him. The Witch Cult was able to track Subaru specifically because he was with you. And best of all, since everyone thinks that you're Satella, now the entire Kingdom is hunting us down. Subaru is my entire life, Emilia. To me, there is no point to a world that doesn't have my Subaru in it. I'd destroy the world before I'd let that happen."

Puck closed his eyes and took a deep breath, "The world fears you because of your hair and your race," Puck said more calmly. "That is not your fault. I can forgive the fact that the Witch Cult and the Kingdom are both after you. If we were a family, united, then we would deal with whatever the world threw at us. Because that's what family means. What I can not forgive is how you keep putting Subaru and Betty in danger not because of your birth but because of your actions!"

"What do you mean?" Emilia asked.

"Remember the night at the hunter's hut when you sneaked off to have a cry about how mean the big bad cruel world had been to poor little Emilia? Do you remember how Subaru followed you? Can you even *begin* to imagine how terrified Betty and I were when we woke up and he was missing?!"

"That's not fair, Puck! I didn't know that Subaru was going to come looking for me!"

"Did you ever stop to wonder how Subaru would feel if he woke up and saw someone he loved, who was being pursued by the Witch Cult, was gone?!" Puck shot back.

Emilia flinched.

"Of course Subaru was going to go looking for you. And the Cult might have found you both! You cursed Subaru with frost flowers because you couldn't control your own magic. You talked Subaru into risking his life to save a group of enemy soldiers from the Guiltylowe. Then just yesterday you told all those slaves who Subaru was and who you are and you didn't even realize it until Subaru pointed it out!"

Emilia stood there crying.

Puck turned his back on Emilia and folded his arms across his chest, "You are not an evil witch, Emilia. Contrary to what the peasants say, there really are very few evil witches. Witches as a group are mostly just careless. Witches have too much power and they destroy lives by being careless with that power and the people around them pay the price. This would all be easier if you actually were evil. If you had done all this damage deliberately then at least maybe I could believe you if you finally promised to stop. But you did it all by accident."

Puck turned to stare at Emilia, his expression cold and hard, "You are just a spoiled little girl who has gotten accustomed to other people taking care of you. Maybe Subaru is willing to do that for you, Emilia, but I'm not. Every time you put my family in danger I get that much more tempted to get rid of you, no matter how Subaru reacts. Even if he hates me for it, it's better than losing him due to your carelessness. It's time for you to grow up and accept some responsibility for your own actions. You are *not* family, Emilia. Subaru might be in love with you but I can't trust you not to bring harm onto Betty and my Subaru, Emilia. And where there is no trust, there is no family."

Puck floated away looking for firewood.

Emilia fell down on her knees and cried.

The group had set up their tent and were sitting around a small fire. They were all exhausted.

"Alright guys," Subaru sighed, "It's been a hell of a week but it's almost over. Tomorrow we cross the border and we spent the night in a warm bed with good food. Maybe we'll spend two. Then we head off to Orcos and find a place to settle down for a bit."

The spirits nodded in ascent but didn't say anything.

Poor Betty and Puck, Subaru thought. They must be completely exhausted. What's worse is they're probably still wondering why we're doing this at all. They don't really believe my story about Emilia, they're just doing this for me. Although at least they've been less hostile toward Emilia lately.

OK, we can make this up to them. Once we're someplace safe and warm and they get a chance to rest, they'll start opening up to Emilia. They'll realize she's a good person who wouldn't have bewitched me. They'll come around.

Ironically at some point I need to tell everyone the truth about my Authority, that I'm the one who has been bewitching people. My Authority has been influencing them to care about me. Except for Puck, ironically, because he cares about me due to another person's Authority! Gee, isn't that reassuring?

I need to wait a few weeks before I bring that up. Beako and Emilia are already running on fumes. Can you imagine their reaction when I admit that the person doing all the bewitching was me? That it was my Authority that made them care about me?

They're going to be shattered. They're going to be furious with me.

Maybe I deserve that.

Well, that's a problem for later...

Beatrice jumped, "Subaru! Something is wrong!"

"What?" Subaru asked snapping out of his reverie.

"I don't know, in fact!"

"Something is moving around in these woods," Puck growled, "Something strong."

"A mabeast?" Subaru asked.

"Maybe. Whatever it is, its power is immense," Puck answered.

"Fuck. Is it coming this way?" Subaru asked.

"Not right now, I suppose," Beatrice said after a moment, "Whatever it is, it's a lot stronger than a Stormcrow or even a Guiltylowe."

Subaru bit his lip not liking the images flying through his mind, "Alright, let's put out the fire," Subaru directed piling dirt onto it.

"Should we run?" Emilia asked.

"Run where?" Subaru replied, "Beako, where is it?"

Beatrice pointed off into the dark woods toward the road, "Somewhere in that direction."

"OK, well then we're not going that way," Subaru sighed, "Let's stay here for the moment. Hopefully whatever it is will just pass us by. You guys are exhausted. You should try to get some sleep, I'll keep watch."

"Subaru, you're exhausted too!" Emilia objected.

"Yeah, but I have an Authority! That probably lets me go for days without sleep," Subaru replied.

"Is that true, in fact?" Beatrice asked skeptically.

"Maybe. I don't know," Subaru shrugged.

"Subaru!" Emilia hissed.

"I don't think that Betty and I are going to get much sleep with that thing stalking around the woods tonight," Puck commented, "Let's just see if it moves off."

Puck glanced at Emilia, "You can go to bed if you want," He said not unkindly.

Emilia looked at Puck with a heavy sigh.

Subaru looked over the nearby hill peering out into the dark forest, "Guys, any idea what this thing is? What's bigger and badder than a Guiltylowe?"

"A variety of things, I suppose, but they're all very rare," Beatrice muttered, "Whatever this thing is, it's not local to this area. The mana in these woods wouldn't support it."

Subaru hesitated, "Betty, is it Regulus?" He whispered.

Beatrice stared into the dark for a moment and shook her head, "It's too far away to tell."

"I think it's searching the woods for something," Puck muttered, "If we stay here it'll probably stumble over us sooner or later."

"So either it's another happy little mabeast driven out of its home turf by all the fighting, or it's something the Witch Cult stirred up deliberately to come after us. Or maybe it's one of the Archbishops themselves. Happy choices," Subaru muttered. He turned to Puck, "Is it moving fast? Could we maybe sneak by it?"

"It's moving pretty fast," Puck replied, "We'd have to get lucky to get by it. Maybe if it goes far enough away we could sneak past..."

"But then we're just going down the road which is a pretty lousy place to hide," Subaru grumbled.

"Subaru! It's coming straight for us!" Beatrice exclaimed.

"Fuck!" Subaru said jumping to his feet.

Emilia started frantically breaking down the tent.

"Mili, forget the tent! We'll worry about it later!" Subaru hissed.

"Subaru, I don't think that you can survive the nights up in these mountains without it!" Emilia hissed back.

She makes an excellent point but we still need to live long enough for that to be a consideration. Something worse than a Guiltylowe... Whatever it is, I think my evening is about to become pretty interesting...

Subaru and the spirits stood there ready for anything. There was a blur at the top of the hill.

Subaru's heart sank, "Reinhard," He whispered as the red headed knight slipped Felt off his back.

Subaru stepped forward trying to shield his family.

"Subaru," Reinhard murmured. "I have come to rescue you from this witch's terrible curse."

"I am not under any curse, Red!" Subaru shouted. "Emilia is the one who's been cursed! You have to believe me!"

"Subaru!" Felt screamed, "You have to listen to us! Everything that you're saying is crazy! Put yourself in our place for a second! If we were telling you the same story you're trying to sell us, would you believe it? She's tricking you! You have to get away from her!"

Oh God, what do I even say to that? Fuck! When I am going to wake up from this nightmare?!

Subaru took a deep breath, "I'm ashamed to do this, Red, but as your lord I am ordering you to let us get across the border so I can seek out the cure to Emilia's curse," Subaru said flinching.

Reinhard stared at Subaru with unshed tears standing in his eyes. Felt stood behind him looking frightened.

"Subaru," Reinhard said, "I am to blame for this terrible curse that has warped your mind so badly. I followed a false report of the Black Snake and then was too foolish to question an obviously forged letter from Roswaal. If I had thought to stay at your side then none of this ever would have happened. Therefore I will atone for these wrongs here and now by righting them myself."

Subaru took a deep breath, "Red, that kind of sounds like you intend to ignore my instructions not to harm Emilia. That's not exactly knightly behavior, is it?"

"Yes," Reinhard agreed simply, "I am ignoring a direct command from my lord. My honor and my knighthood are both forfeit for this crime and my life may soon be as well."

Subaru recoiled at seeing how far Reinhard was prepared to go.

"I will free you from this curse no matter the cost. I promise you this as my final act as your knight, and I give you my word as your friend. When the curse is lifted, my lord will mete out whatever justice he sees fit. I am ready to accept the consequences of my actions." Reinhard pronounced drawing the terrible Dragon Sword from its sheath.

"Today I redeem your faith in my friendship, Lord Subaru, by freeing you from this curse that has so twisted your mind. The witch must die!"

Subaru looked behind him and saw Emilia standing there frozen in terror. The spirits stood beside Subaru, trembling.

What the fuck do I do?! I have no chance against Reinhard, none at all! I can maybe block one swing from him before Indomitable times out but even that's questionable. Red moves like lightning. If he just tries to move around me to strike down Emilia I have no way to stop him. The spirits' magic or even Emilia's magic won't do a damn thing against Reinhard.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* but that didn't help at all. His odds against Reinhard were effectively zero.

He tried to reach out to his Authority but nothing happened.

"Subaru!" Felt begged, "Please get away from there! That's Satella the Witch of Envy! She's put a spell on you and she's planning to destroy the world!"

"You have no evidence of *any* of that!" Subaru roared back at Felt who flinched. "None! Everything you just said is based on pure speculation and assumptions! Even if you assume that she did brainwash me, can you point out any action that I've taken I wouldn't have taken anyway? What is she controlling me to do?"

Out of the corner of his eye Subaru saw Beatrice stiffen and gaze off in the distance as if listening to something.

"She's relying on your soft heart to manipulate you, my friend," Reinhard declared sadly. "A witch has sought out the very best of men and seeks to turn him to her own ends. This is unforgivable," Reinhard said sternly.

Subaru took a deep breath and desperately looked for an option that wasn't there.

"If I let you kill me," Emilia cried out, "Will you promise to leave Subaru and the spirits alone?"

"No!" Subaru yelled at Emilia as Beatrice ran in front of Subaru with Puck in her arms.

"Reinhard will not hurt Betty's Subaru, in fact!" She proclaimed.

Beatrice turned to face Subaru and Emilia and waved her hand, striking them both with a hurricane of wind that sent them both flying backwards-

Into a black portal that closed and then they were gone.

Reinhard raced forward but not even he could catch up to Subaru and Emilia before the portal closed.

"Beako!" Felt protested, "What have you done? You've sent Subaru away with that witch!"

Beatrice did not turn around. She and Puck stood there staring at the place where Subaru had previously been.

"Beako, why did you do that? Reinhard could have killed the witch!" Felt demanded.

Beatrice seemed to be gazing a thousand miles off, "Killing the witch would have killed Subaru, I suppose. Betty knows that Subaru would not have been willing to live in a world without the witch," She said listlessly.

Felt gasped.

Beatrice sighed, "Betty has faith in her Subaru, I suppose. Subaru will find the answers. He will find the flaws in this bewitchment and turn against the witch," She said quietly. Beatrice paused, "And if this 'Emilia' is under a curse then Subaru will break it, I suppose."

"How?! Now he's alone with her! There's no one to help him!" Felt demanded.

"Betty's Subaru will discover the solution and fight his way back to Betty and Bubby. Betty and Subaru belong together. It was a promise and that promise means more to Betty's Subaru than anything," Beatrice whispered.

"Lady Beatrice," Reinhard said kneeling down in front of her, "You must tell me where you sent Subaru and the witch! Subaru is in great danger. I have no idea what the witch is planning but she nearly destroyed the world a few centuries ago and doubtless she intends to do the same as soon as her power is recovered!"

"Betty can't tell you where her Subaru is. Betty doesn't know, in fact," Beatrice murmured.

Reinhard and Felt looked at each other helplessly.

"Forgive me, Lady Beatrice and Master Puck. I have been," Reinhard bowed his head, "Directed by the royal council to bind your magic with sealing stones until we are certain that you have not been influenced by the Witch Cult or Subaru's abductor."

Felt turned her face away in shame and Reinhard bit his lip.

Reinhard sighed, "My deepest apologies, Lady Beatrice and Master Puck," Reinhard said sadly wrapping a bracelet of tiny black rocks around her wrist and Puck's.

The spirits did not resist and the bracelets immediately shrunk and tightened until there was no way they could be removed. Puck slowly settled into Beatrice's arms, no longer able to fly.

Beatrice kept staring at the place her contractor had just stood.

"Betty trusts her Subaru, in fact," She whispered.

"Subaru!" He heard Emilia scream.

Subaru's body regained consciousness begrudgingly. He felt cold, terribly cold.

He opened his eyes and looked up to see Emilia staring down at him in a near panic.

"Mili, what happened?" He asked looking around.

Subaru was lying in a snow bank. His robes were soaked clear through and the wind was bitterly cold.

"Subaru, are you OK?!"

Subaru rubbed his brow with a trembling hand, "Yeah, I think so. What happened?"

Emilia looked scared, "Subaru, Beatrice send us through a portal to escape Reinhard. Judging by all the snow, we're probably somewhere in northern Gusteko."

"Ugh. Not many cities up there," Subaru commented looking around at the dense and trackless forest they sat in.

"No. And going through the portal we lost the food bags, the map, and the tent."

"Ugh, my head!" Subaru muttered shivering violently. "OK, that's really bad. Beatrice, do you at least know approximately where we are?"

Beatrice didn't answer him.

Emilia bit her lip. "Subaru," She whispered, "I need you to be *really* brave right now."

Subaru stared at Emilia in horror. He pulled his way out of the snowbank and leapt to his feet.

"Beako?!" He shouted out into the forest. "Puck?!"

There was no answer but the howling wind.

"Beatrice!" Subaru screamed.

OK that's Arc 3 and that's where we leave it for now. I'm curious what people think about this arc and its pacing. Originally, what has now been published as the complete arc 3 was just the first two chapters in the former arc 3 but I felt like that pace forced Emilia and Subaru's wandering in the woods, conflict with friends, and general frustration with their situation to be too abridged. I worked really hard on this arc but I'm not sure if it lives up to the last two and I'm really curious what people think.

Subaru and Emilia are in an unknown location and they're all alone, their friends and even their precious spirit companions have all been taken from them. Does anyone else think that it's strange that Beatrice was suddenly able to open a portal so far away from the library and that she doesn't even know where it led? Emilia can barely control her magic and it may end up turning against her or anyone else. Subaru has finally taken the first step toward connecting with his Authority: Master to slave, with the roles yet to be determined. Can he do it again? Should he even try? Even with just a minimal connection, the Authority seemed to make Subaru invincible, but can he control it or will he lose himself under its influence? And does he even care about the potential price anymore? Subaru views Beatrice as a combination of little sister and daughter. Only the loss of Emilia could have hurt him more. How far will he go to get her back?

They still have no idea how to restore everyone's memories of Emilia or even where to begin.

It's just the two of them against the whole world. They're both stressed and at the limit of their endurance. Neither one can take much more. Subaru may take the first step down a very dark road.

Again, let me know what you think. The more reviews I get, the quicker I'm motivated to come back to the story.

***Chapter 15*: Chapter 15**

Happy Holidays guys!

So I wanted to tell everyone something about the next arc(s).

From here on out, I am going to be sharply tangential off canon. So far, I have not been violating any canonical facts that I am aware of, however I expect to be sharply contradicting things that WILL become canon in the future. The next few arcs will deal heavily with the nature of the witches, the Great Cataclysm, and the world before the Witch of Envy destroyed it. My assumption after reading Arc 6 is that the only way to tie all the canonically established loose ends together is by Subaru and Emilia going back in time and Emilia becoming Satella, the Witch of Envy. You can also tie this in with the 'Subaru is Flugel' or even 'Subaru is Al' theories if you really want to.

Arc 6 spoilers

I base this theory on the fact that as soon as Emilia gets her name back, the dragon suddenly recognizes her as Satella. He didn't recognize her as anything before she gets her name back. That's a big coincidence that he just recovers from senility as soon as her name is restored. The other problem is that Volcanica recognizes Patrasche but is surprised to see her here.

End spoilers

I don't see any way to resolve this without time travel but maybe I'm wrong. Hell, most light novels don't really bother to tie up loose ends anyway. I feel like Satella needs to be Emilia in some way for everything that Satella has said or done to have the right kind of narrative weight. Emilia might have been imprisoned because she can't control her powers and has been waiting for four hundred years for Subaru to either save her or put her out of her misery before she destroys the world for real. Doctor Who proved you could tell a wonderful romantic arc off similar concepts but frankly I don't know if it would work in Re:Zero and the world that it has established.

Anyway, the reason I bring all of this up is that, despite it being my best guess for how the canon story will end, it's just not the story I want to tell. So I'll be moving off what I expect to be the canon. If I contradict any previously established facts of the canon lore, it will be properly introduced and explained why what the characters believed was actually incorrect.

Truthfully, I may not know what's canon at this point. I got through arc 6 of the webnovel but the reality is that I kind of gave up on the series at that point. While originally I thought RBD was an interesting concept, after six arcs of it, I now think that it kills reader investment and wastes an awful lot of time. No character except for Subaru can develop in any loop except for the final loop in each arc. And since I don't like canon Subaru as a character very much, that leaves me with very long boring stretches where nothing that will ultimately matter is happening to any character I care about.

I also feel like RBD is manipulative to the reader. When we watch characters suffer but understand that nobody except for Subaru will even remember that suffering once the loop resets, then why are we supposed to care? I mean, if we watch Ram get ripped to bits by a giant centaur mabeast, are we really supposed to 'feel' that? She'll be just fine in two pages and she won't even remember what happened to her so why should I be invested in her suffering? Hell, why am I even supposed to be invested in Subaru's suffering? By now, he should be acting like Doctor Strange and shaking off his deaths with a deprecating smile. I know that the 'Greed' Route is presented to us as a bad thing but it's still the most

logical way for Subaru to take advantage of RBD (with or without Echidna). There's nothing forcing him to abuse it to a ridiculous extent or kill himself just to check the afternoon weather, after all.

The other problem is that, since we don't know which loop is the 'final' loop in a given arc, it's hard to become invested in the plotline. Imagine if the author decided to kill off Rem, like REALLY kill her off. Would you feel the weight of that death or would you instinctively think that Rem will come back in the next loop? By the time that you realized Rem was well and truly dead, it might be too late for the moment to hit you with real power.

I also don't really feel like the characters are developing very much either, considering that we're now in arc 7 of an 11 arc series. I'm honestly not following the story much at this point. I'm not saying that Tappei is a bad writer or that I am a good one, I'm just saying that I'm not getting what I was hoping for out of this story. So, I'm respectfully wishing Tappei well and letting him go on his own way.

A final question I wanted to raise is, would people be interested in reading one of my own original stories if I found a place to publish it online? I've spent a full year writing about Subaru and Emilia and while I've enjoyed it, it has also been very difficult and rather constraining to my imagination. I feel a need to tell another story at this point.

So here we are again. I hope that people enjoy this. This arc was really hard to write. I haven't taken nine months off, I was writing for hours everyday. I have over 65 drafts of this arc and they pretty much all top a hundred thousand words. The last time I added the size up, the final draft was about two hundred and sixty five thousand words. This arc was HARD.

This arc will be very different in structure from the last three. Each of them was written with the idea that there might only be one more arc to wrap up loose ends. This arc establishes several plot lines that will evolve and resolve slowly over a few arcs. Also there is more development internal to the main characters than we've seen so far.

Honestly, I wrote the first arc as a joke and I wrote the second arc just so I could write 'Who's Emilia.' I wrote the third arc just to make Subaru suffer and once the fourth arc rolled around, I wasn't really sure where to take them next. I knew that they would have to change and grow, both as individuals and as a couple but that's the kind of arc that's very hard for me to write. To be frank, I really suck at writing relationship drama.

The road not taken is always aggravating. An hour or two after I published arc 3, I realized that I had missed a golden opportunity to introduce Felt as the new royal candidate in this new Emilia-less 'reality.' Felt and Subaru would have been 'engaged' officially and just good friends behind the scenes. This would have given Felt more reason to be angry with Subaru running off with Emilia and given Reinhard fresh reason to resent Subaru for doing so.

Ah. The road not taken. Maybe some day I'll rewrite Arc 3 and what comes after with that idea in mind. Then again maybe things will turn out for the best this way after all. Who knows?

So here we are. Subaru has lost almost everything. Where does he go from here?

"Beatrice? Beatrice!" Subaru yelled.

The snowy forest was silent except for the howling wind.

"Beako!" He screamed.

"Subaru," Emilia murmured, grabbing his arm, "I don't think... Puck and Beatrice came through the portal..."

Subaru stared at her in open-mouthed horror.

"Oh my God," Subaru whispered, looking around frantically, "Where the fuck are we?! We need to go help them! They're all alone with Reinhard!" Subaru yelled, taking off at a run.

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted, grabbing onto his arm tightly. She jerked Subaru off his feet as he tried to run away. He fell back against her and she held him tight as he struggled.

"Mili! Let go of me!"

"Subaru, we don't even know where we are right now! Beatrice must have teleported us someplace far away. It's late spring so all this snow suggests that she sent us to northern Gusteko. That's got to be dozens, maybe hundreds of miles away at the very least and we don't even know which direction Lagunica is in!"

Subaru stared at her in astonishment, "Emilia, we have to do something! Puck and Beatrice are gone!"

"I know that," Emilia whispered in a placating tone, "I'm as worried about them as you are. But the fact remains that we don't know how to help them right now. We can't just rush off in a panic..."

"Beako," He whispered, falling to his knees in the snow. Subaru's face was a caricature of misery and his eyes were hopeless as he stared up at Emilia.

"I know," Emilia murmured, pulling him into a hug and letting his head rest against her chest, "I know just how you feel. We'll find her, Subaru. I promise. And Puck too."

Subaru was panting for breath, "I can't believe that I lost her. I lost *both* of them. I can't..."

"We'll find them, Subaru," Emilia whispered, stroking his hair, "I love them too. They're family. We *will* bring them

home."

Subaru leaned on Emilia as she helped him back to his feet. Subaru was covered in snow and shivering violently from the cold wind.

Emilia looked at him with concern, "Subaru, are you alright?"

It took Subaru a moment to gather the breath to reply. "Sure," He said through chattering teeth, "Never better! We just need... to go find... our partners..."

Emilia frowned, "Subaru, I don't think that you're dressed for this kind of weather."

He gave a choked laugh as he wrapped his arms around himself trying to warm up, "Hey, I'm not the one wearing a skirt under that robe!"

"My mana keeps me warm," Emilia explained, "When I was living in the forest with Puck, I didn't have many clothes. I usually just covered myself with a cloak until Puck started to police my outfits."

"Normally that image would put happy thoughts in my mind," Subaru grumbled through violently chattering teeth. "But not right now. OK, we need to figure out where we are."

Emilia frowned. "How do we do that?"

Subaru whirled on her. "I don't know!" Subaru yelled, "I have no freaking clue where we are! I don't know where Beatrice and Puck are! I don't know *anything*, Emilia!" The words echoed through the snowy forest as Subaru stood there, panting for breath and looking frantic.

Emilia stared at him for a moment, "It's alright, Subaru," She said soothingly, "We can figure it out together, right? Like you always say, as long as we're together, we can do anything."

Subaru took a ragged breath and then nodded, "OK," He sighed. "OK... I'm sorry, Mili..."

"So how should we start?" Emilia asked in a calm voice as the snowfall started to increase and the wind picked up.

Subaru shook his head. "Well... We should start by looking for people." He thought for a moment. "A town will have smoke over it, especially in this weather because they'll need to keep their houses warm," Subaru said. "So we could try looking for smoke. Towns need water too so if we find a decent sized river, it will probably lead us to a town or at least a farmhouse."

"Alright," Emilia encouraged, "That all sounds good. Any idea which way we should go?"

Subaru, still shivering violently, looked around for a few moments and shook his head, "No idea. How about that way?" Subaru suggested, pointing toward a dense grove of pine trees.

Emilia studied it for a moment. "I suppose it's fine but why that way?" She asked.

"Because this wind is brutal," Subaru said through chattering teeth, "And I'm hoping that those trees will help shield me from it!"

"Oh. That makes sense," Emilia agreed.

The two began wading through knee-deep snowdrifts as the weather turned more and more hostile. Emilia walked through the snow without much effort but Subaru had to fight his way through each step.

"What are you thinking about, Subaru?" Emilia asked, trying to fill the silence with something other than the howling wind.

"I'm thinking that I am going to dedicate my entire life to killing Reinhard if he harms so much as one hair on Beatrice's head!" Subaru hissed.

Emilia jumped. "Subaru, you shouldn't be thinking like that," Emilia murmured. "Felt and Reinhard will take good care of Puck and Beatrice! And Reinhard didn't mean to do anything bad. He... thought that he was helping you. He was obviously wrong but he didn't mean to do any harm."

"Yeah well, we have a saying back home," Subaru growled, fighting his way through the snow using sheer anger to push him forward. "'Any sufficiently advanced stupidity is indistinguishable from malice!'"

"What does that mean?"

"It means that when you fuck up badly enough, it stops mattering if it was an accident!" Subaru snapped.

Subaru didn't look behind him as he said this or he would have seen Emilia flinch and her face grow miserable.

He's right, Emilia thought. This is all my fault. I need to find a way to make it right...

Subaru and Emilia walked long into the night. They were both exhausted.

Emilia held onto Subaru's shoulder trying to help him as he struggled through the snow. Emilia was tired but

comparatively in much better shape. Her mana shielded her from the biting cold and she was strong enough to move through the snow fairly easily.

The forest seemed to go on forever. Subaru had lost track of how many miles they had traveled but they hadn't stumbled upon so much as a rough trail in the woods. No smoke could be seen over the horizon and they had found no rivers. The forest periodically broke into wide meadows but there were no tracks in the fresh snow that might indicate what direction to go in. Most of the time, Subaru and Emilia were forced to stumble through the thick underbrush where icy branches snapped at their faces and hands as they pushed through.

Subaru shook his head. *Beatrice. How did I ever let this happen? You took a chance on me. You bet your happiness on me. I promised you that we'd be together forever...*

And I managed to lose you in less than a month. I don't know where you are, I don't know if you're safe, or what Reinhard and Felt plan to do with you...

I am the biggest loser in two worlds. Even when I'm granted enormous magical power, I still suck. As soon as an opportunity came to screw up and let the people I love down, I grabbed it with both hands.

"Subaru," Emilia murmured, "It's getting really late. I think that we need to find someplace to spend the night."

Subaru barked a laugh. "I thought that was what we've been trying to do. We've been walking for hours through this frozen hell and we haven't found anything but trees and bushes. We haven't even seen any animals! We can't just sleep in the snow, Mili, we'll freeze to death. Well, *I* would at least."

Emilia's face was a mask of worry. "Subaru, why don't you try to get some sleep? I can carry you for a while."

Subaru took a deep breath and then swallowed it silently. He realized that he had been about to explode in rage at Emilia. "It's alright, Mili," He murmured. "I can keep going for a while longer. Frankly, I doubt that I could sleep right now anyway."

Emilia's face was worried and Subaru sighed. *I need to control myself better. I'm angry and scared and frustrated but I can't take it out on Emilia.*

Why not? A cold voice in his mind mused. Fundamentally, this entire mess is one hundred percent her fault. She lost control of her magic and turned everyone against you, even the spirits. She was the one who talked you into fighting the Guiltylowe and rescuing Captain Falric who naturally told Crusch exactly where you were. And Emilia was the one who told the slaves who you were and then convinced you to give them the wagon. It's not an exaggeration to claim that it's completely Emilia's fault that you lost Beatrice.

Subaru shook his head, trying to dispel the poisonous thoughts. *Shut up! No, that isn't fair. Emilia never meant for any of this to happen. She's dealing with magic that she never even knew she had. Hey, if the fact that she lost control of it is anyone's fault, it's Puck's. Puck tried to keep her his little girl forever and he never let her grow into her own abilities. Then, when she finds herself in a desperate situation, of course she doesn't know what to do!*

Puck makes a very convenient scapegoat, The other voice mused, but that doesn't do you much good. The fact remains that Emilia is your problem right now. And as much as you love her, she's nothing but a burden in this situation. How can you hope to rescue Beatrice knowing that Emilia won't be safe if you bring her into danger and also doesn't have the skills and expertise to keep herself out of trouble even if you find somewhere safe to leave her behind? She's dead weight in this struggle.

Subaru took a deep breath. *No. That's completely unfair. This mess is my fault and mine alone. I wanted to make Emilia happy. I could have just said 'no' to her. We could have kept walking and let the Guiltylowe have its prey. We could have wished the slaves luck in getting somewhere warm before the night fell and the cold became extreme. We would have been over the border safely in a few hours. I should have told Emilia 'no, we can't help anyone else because we need to take care of ourselves first. You can only help others if you yourself are not in desperate need of help.'*

Fuck it. I'm a fucking liar. Even if I'd been all alone, I'm not sure that I could have done either of those things. Could I really have left those men to be Guiltylowe chew toys? Captain Falric is a good man. He doesn't deserve to die like that. And Emilia was right, the slaves would have suffered frostbite for sure before they ever got out of the mountains. Walking all those miles on bare feet, the children would have been going through life with two toes on each foot.

Beatrice's loss is my fault and no one else's. She was a fool to put her faith in me. She thought that I could keep her happy? God, I couldn't even keep her safe! I led her into a trap in the Sanctuary where the barrier's mere presence made her sick. I brought her through five different fights with the Sin Archbishops, I've made her a fugitive from the kingdom, and now I've even let her be captured in my place...

Fuck me. I wonder if all this has made her finally figure out that the only reason she bonded with me in the first place was because my Authority made her. Next time I see her, she'll probably reduce me to mulch. Not sure that I could blame her.

Subaru growled under his breath. *I can't believe that Felt and Reinhard actually betrayed me! Just like that. After everything that we've been through together, they refused to even consider that I knew what I was talking about. I wanted nothing from them. All I asked for was to be left alone! Emilia and I weren't hurting anyone. But Felt told the kingdom that a witch walked the land and the kingdom scrambled to hunt her down and kill her. Or maybe they planned to kill us both for all I know. Crusch certainly wouldn't shed too many tears if she found out that something had happened to me.*

And what about Rem. I saved her life. I saved it over and over again. I forgave her when she attacked me and Reinhard wanted to kill her. I protected her from Roy and Capella when they attacked the Sanctuary. I saved her from Lye. I lured Capella away from everyone when she was tracking us. This was the thanks I get? She threatens to kill me. She accuses me of trying to get Beatrice and Puck killed.

The fucking bitch. I should have just handed her to Capella as a distraction. 'Here, Capella. Please take this humble and delicious peace-offering. Take as long chewing her up as you want, it will give the rest of us a good long head-start.'

The cold voice in his mind mused, Everyone has turned against you. The only person whose loyalty never wavered was Beatrice and now she's lost to you as well.

That's not true. Emilia never turned on me. I still have Emilia.

True, the voice admitted, but Emilia is incapable of aiding you in a tight spot. You can't even leave her alone without any confidence that she won't be in danger. Emilia is a liability, not help.

Subaru sighed. I need to reduce this to my highest priorities. I need to get Emilia somewhere safe. That's priority number one. Then I need to figure out how to rescue Beatrice.

Unfortunately, I have no idea how to accomplish either of these goals because I am currently lost in the goddamn frozen woods!

Fuck me.

It was the middle of the night. The forest was black as pitch and Subaru could barely see where he was going although Emilia seemed to have no trouble.

After Subaru had tripped and fallen three times over rocks or roots, Emilia finally took point and led Subaru by hand through the underbrush. Subaru's body screamed for rest but he just kept walking long through the night.

The frigid wind cut to the bone and the snow kept falling.

Put one foot in front of the other. Keep moving. Don't stop to think about what just happened or you might be unable to move at all.

This is turning into one enormous nightmare. First, everyone forgets about Emilia. Then Felt and Reinhard turn against you. You lost Beatrice, and that's not even considering what you did at the slaver camp-

Stop it! No time to unpack that now! You need to find Beatrice and Puck! You need to keep Emilia safe! Even if you need to tear yourself to pieces in the process you have to accomplish these tasks.

Then you can die.

Subaru blinked at this strange thought that had risen unbidden out of the depths of his mind. I must be more exhausted than I thought. Subaru pushed the idea away as he continued to struggle through the snow and the dark forest.

I feel... off balance. When was the last time that I walked any kind of distance without Beako on my shoulder?

I can't believe that it's only been two months since we met. Beako has become a part of me, just as much as Emilia has. Not in the same way, obviously but just as essential. I feel as if I've had something amputated. I feel... incomplete. I feel violated. I just want to scream until my lungs explode...

Subaru held his breath, worried that he really might start screaming, and when he couldn't take it any longer, he triggered Reason and Judgment. The snowstorm froze around him, each snowflake held up for his inspection, tiny fractal jewels suspended in mid air.

You're not calm inside the frozen moment, Subaru mused. This is a bad sign. You're so terrified that something might have happened to Beatrice and Puck that not even Reason and Judgment can completely shut the fear off.

Regardless, the only cure for this situation is to take action. You will recover Beatrice. This is as certain as the sun rising and woe betide anyone who gets in your way. Anyone who attempts to separate you from Beatrice has made an enemy of Subaru Natsuki and that is always the shortest path to the grave.

However, you need to finally accept the truth: Your only remaining resource is the Authority. Your friends have betrayed you and the spirits are lost to you. All you have left is the Authority.

Beatrice suggested that the Authority would grow stronger as you gave into your own 'flaws' and in this case it seems obvious that the particular flaw she referred to is your pride. To master the Authority, perhaps you simply need to believe that you deserve to do so. You do struggle with self-esteem but luckily you have Reason and Judgment to help you. Perhaps Reason and Judgment unlocks first for all wielders of this Authority; it helps them to master the Authority by filling them with overwhelming confidence. It seems sensible that to master the Authority, you're simply going to have to use it more often. It's time you moved past your constant fear of using Reason and Judgment. You've been trying to limit your usage of it for weeks now and things have only spiraled further out of control.

How many of the problems now facing you could have been defused if your intelligence and willpower had been heightened to their utmost limit? Could you have talked Felt and Reinhard down? Persuaded them to wait and see about Emilia? You and Emilia are in a desperate situation right now and anything you do that in any way limits your potential

is risking Emilia's life. Even if Reason and Judgment is causing some unspecified damage to you, what of it? How much damage would you be willing to accept in exchange for Emilia's life and safety?

Moreover, the Authority is now your only option for a variety of other problems. Roswaal suggested that its power was close to infinite once controlled properly by its rightful master. That master is you. Even Reinhard thought that you could tame the dark power he sensed in you. It's time that you proved his faith in you was merited, if only to establish how unwise him choosing to betray you actually was. All this time, you have been treating the Authority like a parlor trick but its magic has unimaginable potential in the right hands.

You need to start practicing with the Authority. Study it. Learn to harness it, rather than simply relying on using it on impulse. The Authority is the best candidate right now to break Emilia's curse. Beyond that, the Authority is currently your only possible means to fulfill your promise to Emilia to heal the forest.

Imagine going back to the Elixir Forest and commanding that the curse be lifted. The Authority could certainly do that for you. Emilia's magic, potent though it may be, is insignificant next to the unimaginable power of the Authority. What if you could speak Emilia's name in front of Reinhard and Felt and force them to remember her? Dispelling whatever the Archbishops did to Emilia should be child's play.

The Sin Archbishops are still hunting for you. Facing them in combat all alone would be a desperate affair. But what are their piddling little parlor tricks in comparison to the vast power of the Authority of Pride? Pride is the first and greatest of sins. A man who can conquer Pride can accomplish anything. Picture Regulus breaking under your will and begging for mercy. Imagine Capella's magic abandoning her at your direction and leaving a frightened, helpless little girl trembling before you.

Moreover, consider the long term problems that bedevil you. Emilia doesn't really want to be King, or even your Queen. You know this. But she does want to fix the kingdom and that's a problem. That's a lifetime of labor during which Emilia is going to be surrounded by crowds of people who despise her. She'll be close to miserable. But imagine what would be possible when the Authority submits to you in totality.

Imagine turning your Authority on the Kingdom. Imagine turning it on the whole world! Use your power and demand that this world become a place worthy of you. The Authority would sink its magic into the very fabric of this land and make it a utopia; a paradise where fear and want are only legends known from story books. A kingdom that would bring awe to the stars themselves, with the greatest of rulers gently guiding his chosen people toward peace and prosperity. All of this is possible once you master the infinite power of the Authority.

You must master the Authority. The Authority is your only trump card right now. Luckily for you, it's the strongest card in the deck.

Subaru restarted time and his calm and confidence drained away like water into parched sand.

He struggled to keep walking in the biting cold.

"Subaru, is that a cave?" Emilia murmured late that night.

Subaru wearily lifted his head. He'd lost track of how far they'd come in the dark and snowy forest. He knew that the distance itself was not very impressive but each step through the deep snow had taken huge amounts of effort and the freezing wind sapped his strength.

Subaru sighed. "I can't see that far in this murk," He admitted. "But anything that gets us out of this cold and gives us a chance to rest is awesome as far as I'm concerned."

The two stumbled through the snow, Emilia almost carrying the exhausted Subaru. As they got closer, Subaru saw that Emilia was right. It did appear to be a small cave. It would be cold, damp, and dirty but at the moment simply getting out of the screaming wind and the endlessly falling snow seemed like an unparalleled luxury to Subaru.

Don't get too excited, Subaru reminded himself. *With our luck, the cave will probably have a pack of wolfgarm living inside.*

Emilia and Subaru stepped into the cave mouth but a moment later she froze in her tracks.

"Emilia, what is it?" Subaru groaned, every muscle aching.

"Subaru, there's something in there," She whispered.

"A mabeast?" Subaru asked, peering into the dark.

There was a low growl from the cave and two points of glowing red appeared in the shadows. A Guiltylowe slowly crept out of the darkness.

Perfect.

"Get behind me!" Subaru ordered.

Emilia glanced at him and planted her feet, refusing to move so Subaru took a step forward and stretched an arm out protectively in front of her.

The monster towered over Subaru and Emilia, its bushy black mane scrapping the top of the cave mouth. The

Guiltylowe growled at them.

Subaru tensed but the Guiltylowe didn't attack. It stood there glaring at Subaru and Emilia. It seemed somehow reluctant to make the first move.

On some strange impulse that he couldn't explain, Subaru grabbed Emilia and slowly backed them away from the cave mouth. The Guiltylowe glowered down at them but the lion-like beast didn't spring. Subaru set their backs against a nearby tree and waited.

The Guiltylowe scowled at Subaru. For a long moment, nobody moved.

Then the Guiltylowe slowly slunk out of the cave. It never took its burning crimson eyes off of Subaru for a moment. Its gaze was fairly dripping with loathing. When the beast had left the cave and walked some distance away, it finally turned its back on the pair and vanished into the darkness.

Subaru let out an explosive breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding.

"What just happened?!" Emilia demanded incredulously. "Subaru! Is it going to wait until we fall asleep and then ambush us?"

"I kind of doubt it, Mili," Subaru sighed, almost too tired to speak. "If it wanted to take us by surprise, it just passed up a terrific opportunity to do it. I'm guessing that it decided that we were a fight that it didn't want to pick and opted to back down. But I'm not sure *why* it made that decision and that worries me."

Emilia bit her lip. "Subaru, it doesn't matter right now. You need to get some rest."

Subaru sighed and laboriously marched into the cave. "Yeah. I've got to admit, that sounds wonderful. I feel like I could sleep on broken glass right now."

"How about hard stone?" She murmured.

"Yeah, that too," Subaru said, looking around the mabeast lair that reeked of decay and excrement.

Subaru found a relatively clean spot on the floor and laid down, using his satchel for a crude, lumpy pillow and beckoned Emilia to lay down beside him. "I'm probably not a very good pillow," Subaru said, guiding her head to his chest. "But I hope you can get some sleep."

"But what about you?"

Subaru shrugged. "Honestly, I'm not sure that I could sleep tonight, no matter how tired I am. My brain is running all over the place."

Emilia was quiet for a moment. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Subaru sighed. "What's there to talk about? I watched our family get ripped in half tonight and I was completely helpless to prevent it."

"Subaru, that wasn't your fault," Emilie murmured.

Subaru chuckled ruefully. "It sure feels like it was, Mili," Subaru replied. "I couldn't even get us over the border without getting captured by Reinhard and Felt. The only reason we got away is because Beatrice pulled a miracle out of her sleeve but I have no idea where we are *or* where the spirits are. I don't know how we're going to make everyone remember who you are or even where we can find a safe place to lick our wounds and make plans. Fuck, I don't even know where our next meal is coming from! Man, I'm pathetic. You know, you and Beatrice really have horrible taste in the people you love."

Emilia didn't answer right away. "Subaru, you need to stop talking about yourself this way," She said firmly. "No one could have gotten us out of the Sanctuary any better than you did. Thanks to you we all got away safely. That's a big deal, Subaru."

Subaru sighed. "But we didn't all get away safely, did we? Beatrice and Puck got captured. I don't even know if we got away safely because I have no idea where the hell we are. Gusteko only has a few cities and the northern woods are very sparsely occupied. I don't know how far we might need to walk through these woods before we stumble over a farmhouse, much less a town." Subaru shook his head with a sigh. "I'm sorry, Mili. I'm just talking about how this affected me. I can't imagine what you must be feeling now that Puck's been taken away. You must feel even worse."

Emilia took a deep breath. "I feel... better than you'd think, actually. I've had time to adapt."

"What do you mean?"

Emilia smiled sadly. "Subaru, I lost Daddy days ago. I lost him the day that he forgot who I was."

Subaru winced. "Oh. Yeah, I guess it would feel like that."

"Him being gone... it's almost a relief, honestly," She said.

"Hm?"

"It's just... it's so hard seeing Puck floating next to *you* and knowing that he despises me," Emilia murmured.

"Mili, he doesn't despise you," Subaru reassured her. "He's just uncomfortable with you and it's going to take some time for him to adjust. He's getting better."

Emilia gave a half-hearted chuckle. "Subaru, Puck threatened to kill me today."

Subaru's eyes grew huge. "What?"

Emilia nodded against Subaru's chest. "I tried to make up with Puck while we went off to gather firewood. I told him... how sorry I was about everything that had happened. Daddy didn't care. He told me that I was doing nothing but putting you in danger. He said that each time I screwed up, he was more tempted to kill me, even though he knew how you would react..."

Subaru could only stare at her. "What the fuck?!" He breathed.

"He reminded me about the time that I cursed you and Felt-"

"Mili, that was an accident," He reassured her.

Emilia ignored him. "And then he reminded me about when I had convinced you to rescue those soldiers from the Guiltylowe. How I had told the slaves who you were and that I didn't even realize I'd done that until you pointed it out to me," Emilia said, sounding ashamed. "I even talked you into giving away our wagon..."

Subaru shifted uncomfortably. "Mili, *I* chose to do those things. You didn't make me do any of them. Puck is being utterly unfair to you."

Emilia whimpered. "That's why I'm not more upset that Puck was captured, Subaru. I feel horrible even saying this about Daddy but... it's easier to have him gone than to have him beside me and know that he hates me and wants me dead. What's worse is that... I've realized that even when Puck loved me, he *never* respected me."

"What do you mean?"

Emilia sighed. "Daddy... loved me because I was his daughter but not because I was Emilia. Even when Puck disliked you, he still respected you. You had traits and skills that he admired. Now that Puck doesn't think of me as his daughter anymore, he has nothing but contempt for me. He thinks that I'm stupid and helpless. And now, I've realized that... Puck *always* would have felt that way about me if I hadn't been his daughter. He thinks that I'm pathetic," She burst into tears.

Subaru wasn't sure what to say so he just held Emilia close and let her cry into his chest as he stroked her back.

After a while, Emilia cried herself out and her breathing became deep and even.

She's exhausted, Subaru mused to himself. *She needs to rest.*

Goddamn it. I thought that Puck was coming around. Now I find out that he's still debating if he needs to kill Emilia to protect me! I remember all those times Puck thought about ending me when we first met. They weren't fun. How much worse is it for Emilia to have to deal with this behavior from her own father? No wonder she's relieved that he's gone.

She needs to rest and I need to figure out where we are and where we're going. I need to find out where Beatrice and Puck are and how I can rescue them.

Fuck. Once I rescue them, my problems are just starting! I need to figure out how I'm going to stop them from killing Emilia! Can anything else go wrong?!

Subaru was still brooding on this when he fell asleep between one thought and the next.

Subaru slept until late the next morning. He felt like he could have slept for days but the urgency of their situation gnawed at him and he reluctantly forced himself awake.

The first thing he noticed was that Emilia was gone.

Subaru's heart leapt into his throat. Subaru jumped to his feet but before he could set off in search of his lover, he heard footsteps in the snow just outside the cave.

Emilia walked back inside the cave with a pile of berries in her arms. "Good morning, Subaru."

Subaru let out an explosive breath. "Mili," He grumbled, fighting not to snap at her, "If you need to go somewhere while I'm asleep, please either wake me up first or get some paper out of my satchel and leave me a note."

Emilia looked a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Subaru," She murmured.

"No worries. What were you doing?"

"I was foraging," She replied, putting down the pile of tiny purple berries on top of Subaru's satchel and kneeling on the floor just inside the mouth of the cave. "It seems that living in the Elior forest was actually good training for finding food in Gusteko. I found a bunch of Juniper berries."

"Awesome!" Subaru said, sitting down next to her. *I have no idea what Juniper berries taste like but a bowl of cooking lard sounds like a banquet right now.*

The pair started to eat the berries together.

"Did you see anything while you were out?" Subaru asked.

Emilia shook her head. "I only went a mile or so in each direction but I didn't see any sign of people. There were no houses, no roads, no trails, nothing."

"Great," Subaru sighed, "So we are still hopelessly lost in the vast northern woods."

Emilia chewed on a berry thoughtfully for a moment. "Subaru, maybe I should go on ahead while you wait here."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I can move around in the cold and the snow a lot better than you can," Emilia pointed out. "I could go exploring today and cover a lot more distance. Maybe I'll find a town or a homestead."

Subaru shook his head. "I don't want us to be separated right now, Mili. We're both less vulnerable when we're together. Besides," He added pensively, "After what happened to Beatrice and Puck last night, I don't think that I could handle letting you out of my sight right now. I'd literally worry myself sick..."

Emilia gently slid her hand into Subaru's as they ate.

A short time later, the pair exited the cave. The sky overhead was still overcast and flurries drifted down steadily.

"Which way should we go?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged. "I don't know. You've done more exploring around here than I have. Did any direction seem promising?"

Emilia flashed him a smile. "Walk a mile in any direction and you'll feel like you didn't really go anywhere at all."

"That's what I was afraid of," Subaru sighed. "I don't suppose you saw the sun come up?"

Emilia shook her head.

"So we still don't know which direction is which," Subaru muttered. "Well... I guess that way looks like the lightest part of the cloud cover so maybe that's east? And that means," He pointed. "That way would be south?"

Emilia shrugged.

Subaru chuckled. "Well, whatever. One direction is as good as any other at this point. We just got to keep moving. We'll find somewhere eventually."

"Good attitude," Emilia approved as they left the cave, walking hand in hand.

From far back in the trees, a figure in a hooded robe watched them go.

The pair walked all day long through the vast, trackless woods but they never felt like they were actually getting anywhere. Every part of the forest looked like every other part.

The sun was setting and the wind was picking up. The snow was starting to fall more heavily.

"We better start looking for a place to hole up for the night. This storm might get rough," Subaru commented.

"How far do you think that we've come today?" She asked.

"Not far," Subaru admitted. "It's slow going, breaking through these snow drifts, for me at least. I'm guessing that maybe we're doing a third of what we did when we were walking through the grasslands."

"We should start looking for food," Emilia suggested.

"Yes, food and shelter. Those sound like things we should be searching for right now."

I haven't seen any sign of food or shelter all day. The weather is turning ugly. I almost wonder if it was a bad idea to leave that cave but what could we have done there? Make it our new home? We need to figure out where we are and then find Beatrice and Puck. We couldn't do either of those things back at the cave.

The day faded away and the night began. Subaru and Emilia kept moving, looking for any place to spend the night. Subaru lost track of how many miles they walked. The storm was becoming intense and his vision was sharply reduced.

My brain feels burnt, like it's been cooked in its own stress. I can't handle much more of this crap. Last night, I avoided thinking too much about what happened to the spirits, probably exhaustion keeping me from brooding myself sick but I can't push it down much longer.

Ignore it. Keep putting one foot in front of the other. Just keep moving.

Someone had been following Subaru since he first arrived in the forest. He wasn't hard to track. In a wilderness where

he'd seen no sign of any living thing, he gave no thought to trying to conceal his passage.

However, even if he *had* tried to cover his tracks, his pursuer would have had no trouble following the trail. Subaru Natsuki had a very specific 'scent' to anyone familiar with the more esoteric forms of magic. His aura was strong but also illusive unless you knew what to look for. Having finally located him, they had no intent of letting him slip away again.

But now the watcher was growing impatient. Nothing was happening and there was still no evidence that Subaru Natsuki was the one that they had been searching for since before the world broke apart. A test was needed.

The pursuer smiled. They quickly whispered a jest to the storm and the gossipy wind quickly spread the joke all throughout the forest, along with Subaru Natsuki's scent.

Subaru and Emilia continued walking through the forest. They'd found no signs of civilization but at least the snow drifts in this part of the forest were noticeably smaller and Subaru was able to move more easily. The snow kept falling but the ground in this part of the forest was covered by no more than a dusting.

Well, this is lucky anyway. After a full day of breaking through the snowbanks, I don't think I could keep moving if the snow around here was as deep as it was before.

"Subaru, it's getting really cold. I think we need to stop," Emilia said in a worried voice.

Subaru laughed. "Where? You want to lay down in a snow bank?" He asked, unable to keep the frustration out of his voice.

"No! I mean we need to start looking for a place to stay! This storm is getting worse."

Subaru laughed again. The laughter sounded shrill even to his own ears. "Ok, Mili! Sure! You got a plan for how to do that? Would it be any different than what we're doing right now? We haven't seen so much as a cave since we started out this morning!"

Emilia looked down with a gloomy expression on her face.

Fuck. I know I should apologize to her for being that blunt but frankly, I'm too tired to apologize. I can barely keep walking at this point...

"Look," Subaru said in a conciliatory tone. "There's a hill over there. Let's climb it. Maybe we can see something from the top."

Emilia gave Subaru a sad look and nodded.

Subaru laboriously climbed the hill while Emilia seemed to not struggle at all. The wind was picking up and the cold was so extreme that it burned at Subaru's skin.

"I'm sure that Reinhard and Felt are taking good care of Daddy and Beatrice," Emilia tried to encourage him.

Subaru's chattering teeth made answering difficult. "That's only reassuring if they have custody of them. Crusch could try to place them in her custody. Or the kingdom could demand that they be surrendered."

"Reinhard would never allow that!" Emilia swore.

Subaru gave a bitter laugh. "Red?! Have you met him? If the sages' council told him to disappear forever, he'd just get a sad look on his face before he vanished! He'd hand the spirits over to anyone in authority as soon as they asked!"

Emilia looked horrified, as if this thought had never occurred to her. "But why would the kingdom want Beatrice and Daddy?" Emilia asked, her tone suggesting that she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Subaru shrugged. "For leverage, maybe. Maybe the kingdom thinks that they have information about us."

"Daddy wouldn't tell them anything about us!" Emilia said firmly. She hesitated. "Well, he wouldn't tell them anything about *you* anyway," Emilia amended sadly.

"That assumes that they have a choice!" Subaru said, stumbling up the hill. "I've spent the past two months reading about the kingdom! Their interrogators don't stop at asking nicely! They-"

Subaru felt full blown panic swept over him at the thought of the little spirits being interrogated and he triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

The last time Subaru invoked *Reason and Judgment* it had failed to completely quiet his raging emotions. It had even more trouble reassuring Subaru this time. His emotions seemed to oscillate between relative calm and full blown panic.

Beatrice. My own precious, little Beatrice. My greatest failure was ever letting you slip away. I will have you back. I don't care what the price is. The kingdom will be buried in flames before I'm done if necessary but I will have you back! We're in Gusteko right now. This land is fertile territory for me. Lagunica will surrender my family to me. They shall give them gladly with both hands.

Gusteko could be mine within the month. I have no hesitancy left about doing whatever must be done to protect my family. Between Reason and Judgment and Indomitable, conquering the capitol would be child's play. I could easily start

by capturing a criminal cartel in the city to acquire resources and manpower. The criminals would quickly kneel to my overwhelming strength. Once I control the underside of the capitol, the nobility will learn to do my bidding. An assassination here, a bribe there, some judicious blackmail on the side, Gusteko will bow to my every word even if only a few people are even aware that I exist.

The King, or whomever rules here, will demand that Beatrice be returned to me by the kingdom and state that war is in the offing if it does not. Would the kingdom care enough about Beatrice and Puck to refuse?

And why stop there? What about Vollachia, Lagunica's ancient enemy? If Gusteko extended a hand, offering an alliance to destroy Lagunica, Vollachia will leap at the chance. Not even Reinhard van Astrea can be in two places at once. My forces will grind the kingdom into rubble until all beg for my forgiveness and vow the safety of my family.

This isn't my world. What do I owe it anyway? What do I care if it's destroyed? My family will flourish. Any other considerations need not concern me.

Subaru restarted time and reached the top of the hill a few steps later. His confidence and conviction faded away leaving behind nothing but a weary ache radiating from sore muscles.

As they looked around, something started to nag at Subaru.

"Emilia," Subaru mused. "You've spent a lot more time in forests than I have, right?"

"I suppose I have. Why do you ask?"

"It's just... does anything feel... *wrong* to you about this forest?" Subaru asked awkwardly.

Emilia thought about it for a moment. "There's a lot of mana here and it's especially pure. It's a very vibrant forest in that regard."

"Yeah, but where is everyone?"

"Hm?"

"Mili, I haven't seen a bird or a squirrel or even a bug in two days. The only living creature that we encountered was that Guiltylowe. That isn't normal, no matter how far north we are. Why would this forest be so dead?"

Emilia frowned thoughtfully.

Subaru looked around trying to spot any kind of landmark or location of interest to walk toward but he saw nothing. The wind was throwing snow in every direction and seeing more than a dozen yards away was impossible.

Wait a second. Don't the spirits draw mana from me? If they're hundreds of miles away right now, can they still do that? What if my absence denies them mana? Could that make them sick? Could they maybe even starve?!

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*, trying to calm himself. However, this time the storm didn't pause around him. The snowflakes slowed and sped up and slowed and sped up over and over again as a sharp pain built up in Subaru's head.

Finally the effect faded without *Reason and Judgment* ever fully triggering. The storm kept raging as Subaru violently shook his head, trying to clear it. He wasn't sure that he'd ever had a migraine this piercing.

He thought that he might throw up.

"Subaru, are you OK?" Emilia asked.

Subaru held his head between his hands. He felt as if his skull might shatter from the pain. "Mili, can you see anything?" Subaru shouted over the wind.

Emilia peered into the storm and then gasped.

"What?"

Emilia's eyes were wide with horror. "Subaru," She whispered. "We're not alone here."

"What is it?" Subaru said, forcing himself to ignore his exhaustion and pain as he peered through the storm.

A moment later, Subaru saw it himself. Great dark shapes with burning red eyes came prowling through the storm.

"We're surrounded," Emilia whispered.

Subaru looked down the hill and saw four lion-like Guiltylowe as well as several dozen of the wolfish wolgarms. The hill was indeed surrounded.

Oh, my God! Can I just get a break, please?! How much harder does this need to be?! I just want to get my family back and keep them safe! Is that really too much to ask?!

Subaru swallowed hard. "Emilia, I'll distract them. You run away."

"No!" Emilia snapped. "You're so tired that you can barely move, Subaru! I'll draw their attention and you can run

away!"

"Emilia," Subaru said, almost sounding amused. "Like you said, I'm exhausted. I can't run for any kind of distance. You're the only one with any chance to get away so I want you to take it."

Emilia stared at him in horror and violently shook her head. "I *won't* leave you!"

"Emilia! You-" Subaru paused. "Wait. Why aren't they attacking?"

What are they doing? They're just kind of... standing there in that loose ring around the hill. They've just watching us.

Why? We have no chance against these kind of numbers. Or... do they not know that?

Mabeasts don't have a lot of variety in their facial expressions but if I had to guess, I'd say that they all look... indecisive, maybe even confused.

"Subaru, what's going on?" Emilia whispered.

Subaru snorted. "Hey, you know as much about this as I do," He replied.

From the depths of the forest, Subaru heard a resounding thud. And then another one. Thud after thud, steadily drawing closer.

Through the swirling snow born by the wind, a great shape appeared. It was a towering bipedal form at least eighteen feet tall. It was shaped somewhat like a gorilla or a yeti. Its fur was pitch black and the skin on its face and bare chest was the color of dried blood. Its yellow eyes burned and two great lower tusks thrust up out of its jaw and over its cheeks.

The titanic beast walked slowly to just outside the ring of mabeasts and stood there, staring at the pair.

"...Snow Blight," Emilia whispered in horror.

"What?"

"It's a Snow Blight! It's one of the most powerful kinds of mabeasts. There was one in the far northern part of the Elion forest but Puck and I always gave it a wide berth. Subaru, this monster is far too strong for us to fight," Emilia whimpered.

Subaru clenched his teeth. "I am sick to death of being forced into fights that I can't win!"

The Snow Blight inhaled noisily and gave a ponderous growl. It then began to walk toward the pair trapped inside the ring of mabeasts. The other mabeasts remained in position and watched the beast approach. Their heads were bowed and their posture was submissive. The two Guiltylowe nearest the beast wordlessly gave way at his approach, giving him a clear path to the hill top.

"Subaru! We need to run!" Emilia hissed. "I'll carry you and we'll try to escape!"

Seriously, Mili?! Do you really think that you can outrun a pride of Guiltylowe?! Especially while carrying me?!

This is bad. There have got to be sixty mabeasts here and that's not even counting the Snow Blight! We can't outrun the wolgarm and Guiltylowe and we can't fight the Snow Blight! What the fuck do we do?!

The Snow Blight stomped toward them with a deliberate slow stride. Every step sounded like thunder.

"Subaru!" Emilia hissed in near terror.

Nothing to lose! Let's try our new trick! Subaru raised his hand. "*Pridebreaker!*" He roared. "Kneel before me!"

Why did I say that?!

Emilia gasped as she felt a surge of dark power radiate outward from Subaru like a great wave. She sensed all the lesser spirits for miles around fleeing in panic from Subaru's magic.

The wolgarm screamed and whined, their legs trembling violently. Then one by one, the wolgarm's front legs bent, their heads slumping down in the snow as they bowed.

The Guiltylowe writhed in pain, their bodies shaking as they struggled against the overwhelming compulsion that assaulted them. They froze in place, agonized roars trailing off into pained whimpers. They shook their manes violently and their bodies trembled but they did *not* kneel.

Subaru doubled over and vomited. A glut of something thick, black, and sticky with thin streaks of red slowly poured from his mouth. The tar-like substance filled Subaru's mouth with an acrid taste like burnt rubber.

Subaru hurriedly brushed his mouth clean.

The Snow Blight looked at the other mabeasts in confusion for a moment then continued to stomp toward Subaru and Emilia.

Subaru quickly looked around at the surrounding mabeasts that either knelt in the snow or were violently trembling in

place.

This is the best chance that we're going to get!

"Come on!" Subaru shouted, grabbing Emilia's hand and running away from the Snow Blight as fast as he could.

Emilia quickly fell in beside Subaru as they bolted toward the edge of the ring of mabeasts.

The Snow Blight gave a colossal roar and began to chase after them.

Subaru and Emilia had to bolt between two Guiltylowe to escape. The beasts were growling and whimpering as they stood there, frozen like statues, but they made no other reaction as Subaru and Emilia darted between them.

Moments later, the Snow Blight crashed through the line of mabeasts sending the smaller beasts flying in all directions.

"Subaru! What do we do?" Emilia shouted.

What the hell do we do?! Fuck it! Run to where the snow banks are smallest! It looks like that part of the forest over there is more open to the wind. There isn't as much snow on the ground because the wind sweeps it clear. That's our best move to outrun this stupid thing!

The pair ran as fast as they could but the roars and the thunderous footfalls of the monster got closer and closer behind them.

Emilia suddenly jerked her hand free of Subaru's and spun around.

"Emilia!" He shouted, skidding to a stop.

Bright cobalt energy erupted from around Emilia's hands, like tendrils of lightning. Her eyes blazed.

She took a deep breath and as the Snow Blight charged up to them she flung a great bolt of cobalt magic at the monster.

The bolt struck the beast full force and it enveloped his head like a blast of water from a fire hose. There was a bright flash and Subaru shielded his eyes. When his vision cleared, the monster's head had been encased in an huge shaft of ice.

Subaru looked at Emilia in amazement as she stood there panting for breath.

The monster shook its head furiously, blundering around in circles and wrenching at the enormous icicle that had grown around its head.

The monster began to beat the icicle with huge fists. Subaru's eyes widened as he saw chips of ice begin to fly.

"Come on!" Subaru yelled, grabbing Emilia's hand and sprinting away again.

A few moments later, they heard the ice shatter and the Snow Blight's furious roars. The sound of its feet shook the earth like a great drum as it chased after them.

Emilia kept running but she turned around long enough to launch a volley of ice crystals at the monster, each one thicker than Subaru's wrist.

The beast roared as the ice shards made contact.

Well, she hit it! But that cry sounded a lot more like a roar of fury than of pain! The Snow Blight didn't even break its stride!

"Save your magic, Mili!" Subaru shouted. "It's not working!"

"Subaru! We'd need an army to fight a Snow Blight!" Emilia screamed. "What do we do?!"

Subaru scanned the area and his gaze zoomed in on a dense grove of trees. "Into those trees!" Subaru yelled back. His legs ached painfully from all the walking they'd done and his lungs burned from the freezing cold air. "We need cover! And the Snow Blight's too big to fit between the trees!"

The two raced into the dense trees. The monster's thunderous footfalls stopped behind them and the beast roared.

For a moment, Subaru thought that they were safe but then a huge pile of snow fell from above, knocking both Subaru and Emilia off their feet.

Subaru shook his head and fought his way out of the heavy snow that had landed on top of them. *What the hell was that? It felt like a dump truck full of snow just decided to drop all its cargo on us.*

Emilia also climbed out of the snow. "Subaru! Snow Blights make huge snowballs to attack prey that's out of reach!"

Subaru heard a cracking sound. He spun around and saw that a huge tree had been fractured by a single blow of the Snow Blight's mammoth fist. It teetered and started to fall toward them.

"Mili! Look out!" Subaru shouted, grabbing her hand and jerking her away from the falling tree.

"We're lucky that the snowball hit the trees before it hit us, Subaru!" She shouted. "We might have been badly hurt otherwise!"

"OK! Snow Blights throw snowballs. Good to know. Anything else about this monster that you feel like sharing, Mili?" Subaru snapped as the tree fell to the ground.

"I don't know much else, Subaru!" Emilia shouted.

The pair stood there panting.

Outside the grove, the Snow Blight grabbed a massive oak tree and ripped it from the ground the same way a man might uproot a small shrub. The monster swung the tree like a bat, smashing it against the trees that made up the protective grove. The uprooted tree splintered but the other trees' trunks began to crack as well. The Snow Blight dropped its ruined, makeshift club and threw its full weight against the cracked trees, continuing to fight its way into the tiny grove.

"Fuck! Move!" Subaru yelled as he pulled Emilia along.

The Snow Blight roared and abandoned its attempt to force its way in. The monster continued its chase, pacing them as it ran around the dense grove of trees.

Fuck! It's just going to stay with us and wait for us to come out! We're running out of trees to hide in and the Snow Blight will just keep knocking them down one by one until it catches us!

We need to find some way to get this thing off our trail!

Subaru and Emilia were running toward the edge of the grove and the Snow Blight followed just outside the trees.

What the hell do I do now? I need options!

OK. There's a huge boulder right outside the trees. Might give me some cover to do... what?

Fuck! I got nothing! And I'm out of places to hide! Better hope an opportunity presents itself!

Subaru emerged from the grove and pressed his back against the rock.

"Subaru-!" Emilia was cut off when Subaru clapped his hand over her mouth.

He heard the Snow Blight charging around the boulder.

Oh crap. Here goes nothing!

As the Snow Blight raced around the boulder, Subaru leaped toward him and triggered *Indomitable*. He hit the titanic beast's knee as hard as he could.

The tree trunk-sized limb snapped like a twig.

The Snow Blight roared in pain and it lost its balance. It fell down a steep incline, rolling away from Subaru and Emilia. Finally, it crashed into a huge tree and lay there, its leg twisted beneath it at an unnatural angle.

Subaru panted for breath but he had a big smile on his face. "That guy will be a whole lot slower chasing us *now*!" He shouted to Emilia, laughing in relief.

Emilia nodded with a smile.

The Snow Blight angrily shook its head and glared up at Subaru and Emilia from the bottom of the slope. It bared its yellow fangs at them with a roar and then used its arms to pull itself up into a sitting position. Its shattered leg lay broken and twisted under its body.

Subaru shook his head with a weary sigh. "We should... get out of here before the big dope... decides to throw more snowballs," He said, panting for breath.

Emilia nodded.

The Snow Blight grabbed its broken leg and jerked on it savagely.

Subaru frowned.

The beast tugged on it a few times and then the leg made a loud cracking sound.

The Snow Blight gingerly put the leg underneath it, testing its ability to hold the monster's weight.

Then it stood up unharmed.

Subaru gaped.

"Subaru!" Emilia gasped.

"Oh, that is *bullshit*!" Subaru roared at the massive Snow Blight. Subaru was suddenly too angry and indignant to even be scared. "That is completely fucking unfair!" He pointed at the monster accusingly.

The Snow Blight looked up at the pair and its yellow eyes blazed with hate. It roared and began to charge up the hill.

"Shit!" Subaru shouted, grabbing Emilia's hand and running away.

"Subaru! What do we do?!" Emilia screamed as they heard the beast's thunderous footsteps behind them and closing in.

I don't know!

Subaru's eyes looked around, searching for an escape. Subaru saw another dense grove of trees. "In here, Emilia!" He shouted, leading them inside.

Subaru heard the beast's footsteps stop.

"This way!" He shouted jerking Emilia in a different direction, zigzagging through the trees.

A moment later a huge snowball crashed into a tree a short distance away, knocking it over. "We need to keep zigzagging so that it can't throw those snowballs at us!"

What the fuck do I do?! The freak can regenerate! How the hell can I kill it? Maybe if I killed it in one blow? If I could shatter its skull, I doubt that it could regenerate from that, but how the hell can I do that? Climb a tree? Ask Emilia to throw me at the thing's face?

Subaru had a sudden mental image of Emilia hurling his tiny body at the monster and the Snow Blight swatting him away like an annoying fly. He pictured his *Indomitable* body smashing through dozens of trees before finally hitting the ground.

Subaru and Emilia emerged from the dense grove of trees. The Snow Blight raced around the trees and began to charge toward them, its every step shaking the ground.

Subaru's lungs burned and his heart felt like it was about to explode.

I can't... breathe... I need something! A resource, an asset, an idea! What's around here?!

A few more groves of trees that we could maybe shelter in for a minute each before the Snow Blight uproots them all. A couple of hills I could spit over. A large frozen lake. A big boulder-

Subaru's eyes widened. *Wait a second!*

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted. "You can't run much further. Stay here and hide! I'll lure the Snow Blight away! Stay undercover, I'll escape the Snow Blight and come back!"

"No, you're not!" Subaru shouted back as he jerked Emilia across an open plain. "This way, quick! I have an idea!"

"Subaru! What are you doing?! We need to stay undercover! We can't outrun the Snow Blight on flat ground and there's no cover out here!"

"Trust me!" Subaru gasped.

I'd like to tell her my plan but I don't have the breath for it! I can't run much further!

Emilia looked terrified but at the words 'trust me' she had swallowed hard and followed Subaru.

Subaru pulled Emilia out onto the frozen lake.

I really hope I'm not overlooking something! This far north, I'm betting that the ice should be thick enough to take our weight easily. But maybe it won't take the Snow Blight's weight!

The lake ice was smooth as a tabletop. Subaru and Emilia ran across it, running, sliding, and slipping, but by some miracle they kept on their feet.

They were approaching the middle of the lake when Subaru saw the Snow Blight had reach the shore and kept charging across it.

OK! The Snow Blight didn't even hesitate to run out on the ice! That's a really bad sign! This monster might be stupid but if it's not worried that the ice won't take its weight then I'm really worried that the ice won't break!

Subaru skipped to a stop. *I can't... run anymore!*

The Snow Blight thundered toward them.

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted.

Time to go for broke!

"Emilia! I want you to use your magic!" He shouted. "Keep the ice under us in one piece!"

"Subaru! What do you-"

Subaru triggered *Indomitable*. He glared at the charging behemoth as it closed the distance toward where they stood in the middle of the frozen lake.

He brought his fists together and slammed them down on the ice in front of him as hard as he could.

There was a thunderous snapping sound and huge jagged cracks started to spread and expand in every direction from the impact point.

Subaru felt the ice under his feet start to give way but Emilia, quickly catching on, used her magic to refreeze the ice they stood on and keep it solid.

The Snow Blight skidded to a stop a few yards away as the ice cracks spread and widened under its feet. The Snow Blight stared down at the widening cracks, its monstrous face contorted with fear.

Then the ice all across the lake broke wide open, dumping the beast into the frigid water. The monster roared, thrashing wildly but the gorilla-shaped mabeast was not well suited to swimming and it had to fight tooth and nail just to keep its head above water.

Subaru collapsed, panting for breath on the small ice float that was sustained by Emilia's magic. Emilia knelt down behind him, holding him tight as the Snow Blight beat the water with enormous fists, its thrashing driving the icy lake into a froth.

The Snow Blight glared at Subaru and Emilia with seething hatred. The beast stopped its thrashing long enough to raise an arm over its head and strike their ice float with one huge fist.

The ice float that Subaru and Emilia sat on flew up like a seesaw and sent them both flying high into the air over the mabeast's thrashing body and toward the shore.

Subaru and Emilia separated in mid air and Subaru saw the lake and its ice floats flying up at him.

Indomitable isn't ready!

He desperately covered his face with his arms as he crashed into the lake.

Hitting the water felt like smashing face first into a brick wall.

The lake water was so cold that it burned. It felt like a thousand icy teeth biting and tearing into Subaru's body. He fought with everything he had not to inhale while he was under water.

A moment later, he felt his feet touch the lake bed and he leaped skyward.

Subaru's head broke the surface and he gasped for air. He saw the lake shore just a few yards away and swam for it desperately.

He hauled himself out of the water and collapsed there, gasping for breath and shivering violently. His muscles were jerking and vibrating as if an electric current ran through them. Subaru couldn't move. His face was pressed against the cold, hard ground and he couldn't seem to lift it up.

"Subaru!"

Subaru managed to turn his head to see Emilia racing toward him on the shore: soaking wet but otherwise unhurt.

"Mili!" Subaru gasped through violently chattering teeth. "Are you... OK?!"

Emilia nodded, not even shivering. "I'm fine, Subaru."

She helped Subaru struggle back to his feet.

Subaru looked out at the lake and saw the beast still struggling. The monster could no longer keep its head above water but its great arms still beat the air uselessly.

A moment later, those too slid out of sight and the lake surface became still.

Emilia was panting for breath. "I can't believe that we survived that," She whispered.

"Yeah," Subaru muttered, his body shivering so hard that he felt like his muscles might tear. "Me neither!"

Subaru glanced at the woods behind him and choked. "This... just isn't fair!" He gasped.

Emilia spun around and gasped. Through the blowing snow, she could see mabeasts, dozens and dozens of wolgarm and even some Guiltylowe, standing in a great half circle surrounding where Subaru and Emilia stood on the lake shore. Their black bodies and crimson eyes were clearly visible through the storm.

Oh God. I have got nothing left...

What the hell can I do... If nothing else, I must get Emilia out of here safely but how can I even do that? I can barely move!

"Subaru," Emilia whispered. "Why... are they bowing?"

Subaru frowned and tried to peer through the blowing snow.

Subaru gasped to see that all the mabeasts were prostrating before them.

What the hell... Pridebreaker! I told them to kneel! ...for some reason. Not really sure why I said that but they are kneeling and putting their faces in the snow.

I guess... they came here so they could obey my command?!

All of the mabeasts' muscles are flexing wildly. They're whimpering and snarling. These monsters aren't submissive, they're fighting the compulsion to kneel with everything they have. And the look in their eyes tells me that if they break free, they'll cheerfully rip Emilia and me apart...

Can I give them new orders?

Subaru looked around, considering. "You may... rise," He said uncertainly.

The mabeasts all stood up, shaking the snow off their pelts. Their faces were angry and confused.

They can't really speak my language, can they? How smart are mabeasts? Or does the magic just ensure that they understand what I want? Wait, what the hell do I do with them?!

Subaru hesitated. "I have no use for you right now, but I suppose that an army of mabeasts could prove useful later... You may all return to your lairs but come swiftly at my call." He paused. "One more thing," Subaru added, pointing at Emilia, "Until further notice, the safety and security of this woman is your top priority. You will allow nothing to happen to her by action or inaction, in peril of my wrath. You may go."

Emilia could only stare at Subaru.

The wolgarm and Guiltylowe all turned and walked away through the snow. Their bodies moved awkwardly, like badly controlled marionettes.

They're still trying to fight my commands. They're moving like that because they really want to come back and tear us apart but my... my magic, my Authority, my... whatever-it-is won't let them.

The mabeasts continued to walk awkwardly until they had traveled some distance away and then they all seemed to give up. Their bodies resumed their normal fluid motion as they stopped struggling against Subaru's compulsion to leave. The mabeasts vanished into the storm.

Subaru's adrenaline abruptly ran out. His eyes rolled up in his head and he fell onto his hands and knees in the snow.

"Subaru!" Emilia screamed, rushing over to him.

"Man," He sighed. With Emilia's help, he laboriously got back to his feet. "That fight really... took a lot out of me. I think that... I'm ready for bed now."

"Subaru, how did you do that?" She asked.

"Oh, it's probably just... some magic thing. I wouldn't... worry too much... about it," Subaru mumbled, gasping for breath.

Emilia wanted to press for more details but she saw that he was shivering violently, "Subaru, we need to get you somewhere safe," She said, looking around. "But I don't see anywhere that we can find shelter from this storm!"

"That's bad," Subaru moaned. "Got any ideas?"

Emilia saw Subaru's legs trembling violently underneath him, "Subaru, maybe it would be better if I just carried you," She said.

"I can still manage," Subaru said in a groggy voice.

"Subaru, I know that you're tough but-" Emilia protested as she took his hand. Her eyes widened in alarm, "Subaru, you feel like ice!"

"Yeah, it's pretty cold out here," Subaru coughed. His shivering felt a little less violent at least but he was feeling very tired all of sudden. He supposed he hadn't gotten much sleep the past few days.

Emilia stared intently into his face, "Oh Gods! Subaru, you're turning blue!" She shouted.

Without waiting for a reply, she swung Subaru up over her shoulder and carried him like a baby as she dashed through the snow at full speed.

***Chapter 16*: Chapter 16**

Crusch Karnstein concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other as she walked down the luxurious carpet in the royal palace.

Nothing had gone right for Crusch Karnstein for weeks now. Her patience had been worn down to her very last nerve. However, this was the royal palace and every word she said and every gesture she made were doubtlessly being meticulously observed. Thus, Crusch bent every ounce of her considerable will to smoothing out her expression and

walking with measured steps. She had left the army camp late the previous evening and ridden all night to ensure that she was at the palace in time for the sages' council's meeting on the strange disturbances that had occurred since the Sanctuary fell.

Felix followed a few paces behind her. He could sense his Lady's rage and frustration but he guessed that no one else would be able to.

"Lady Crusch!" A voice called.

Crusch checked a sigh and turned to face the speaker. He was a tall man, perhaps twenty years older than Crusch. He had dark hair and a kind, open face with a small black beard. "Grand Duke Montefort!" She said, putting a smile on her face for her most powerful supporter. "It is wonderful to see you."

"And you as well, Lady Crusch," Montefort said with a low bow. Montefort was by far the most powerful noble in the kingdom and the head of the Lagunican conservative faction. He had joined the Crusch faction early on and his allegiance had been an enormous stroke of good fortune for her prospects to gain the throne. "I was surprised to find you here. I thought, given your latest report to the royal assembly, that you would be hunting down Subaru Natsuki and his witch."

Crusch's smile became strained. "My scouts remain in the field. I doubt that I personally could add much to the chase. If a trail exists they will find it, I assure you. I returned to brief the sages' council personally on the matter."

"Splendid," Montefort said with an easy smile. "I read your last report. Do you truly believe that this witch... do you truly believe that the Witch of Envy is free? And that Subaru Natsuki is traveling with her?"

Crusch took a deep breath. Montefort's skepticism was palatable but she reminded herself that it was totally understandable. "I have received solid intelligence from numerous sources that Subaru Natsuki is out in the wilds with a woman matching the description of the Witch of Envy."

"So... a half-elf with silver hair, then?"

Crusch's lips tightened. She had to remind herself to be patient. Montefort was one of the most powerful men in the kingdom, perhaps even *the* most powerful. However, he was also a member of Crusch's faction and respected her. Therefore, he was going out of his way to address his skepticism about Crusch's report politely and obliquely. Crusch reminded herself to be grateful for this as when she stood before the sages' council, they would give her no such consideration. "Lord Montefort, I understand that this news is deeply concerning and perhaps even unbelievable but Subaru Natsuki himself admitted to taking this half-elf out of a place called 'the Witch's Tomb'. I believe that it would be extremely wise for us to consider her a powerful threat until the evidence establishes otherwise. We might waste effort this way but that is far preferable to wasting lives."

"Well put," Montefort agreed. "Your father would have said much the same."

Crusch genuinely smiled for the first time in days. "You honor me, Lord Montefort."

"Not at all. However, as a loyal member of your faction, I must urge you to be... *selective* in your admissions to the sages' council. They are considered to be extremely wise men, especially by themselves, and they will not take well to having that wisdom questioned. You will require the sages' council to be amendable to your designs if you seek to carry them out. And above all else, you must make certain that the council believes that this is not partisan politics. I sorely regret to tell you that... reliable sources have informed me that several members of the sages' council, as well as the Royal assembly itself, are convinced that this is simply a slander campaign against your foe."

Crusch nodded. "Unhappy news but not unexpected and likely unavoidable. I will simply present the facts. The sages will draw their own inferences. I am optimistic that this will be sufficient," She paused. "Do you believe that the Royal assembly could be persuaded to take action?"

Montefort rocked his hand back and forth uncertainly. "That depends on what type of action you're looking for."

Crusch thought hard for a moment. "Subaru Natsuki is very likely to be the future king of Lagunica," Crusch said, the words tasting like ashes in her mouth. "The kingdom must consider his safe return a priority. We need to requisition the necessary resources to locate him and ensure his safety."

Montefort thought about it. "The Royal assembly would likely be amendable to such a request. My faction would obviously support you in this matter. However, I do urge you to be... circumspect. The sages' council has authority over the Royal assembly in most areas. If the sages' council is unconvinced of the necessity of this action, they might veto it simply to preserve their power and authority. I must confess that neither I nor my faction has any interest in an open conflict with the sages' council. While the members of the sages' council do serve at the Royal assembly's pleasure, the Royal assembly dismissing *any* member of the sages' council, especially for political reasons, would be a declaration of war between the governing councils of Lagunica that our nation could ill afford at this time."

"Of course. I never intended to suggest such," Crusch agreed.

"Please forgive me, Lady Crusch. I tend to ramble on sometimes. It's a bad habit that I picked up somewhere. You are most courteous to listen to my musing. I know that you must prepare for the council meeting so I will wish you good luck. I am confident in your success."

"Thank you, Lord Montefort," Crusch said with a nod. "You hearten me greatly."

Montefort stepped aside and Crusch and Felix continued down the hallway.

Montefort watched them walk away with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Subaru watched the forest fly by him in bemusement as Emilia ran through the trees like a gazelle.

It was on the tip of Subaru's tongue to protest the way that he was being handled. She didn't have to carry him like an infant, he could still walk after all. But on the other hand, protesting felt like it would have taken an awful lot of work and Emilia felt so warm pressed up against him.

Everything felt fuzzy to Subaru as he pressed his face against Emilia's warm neck, "You feel wonderful," He murmured.

"Subaru!" She shouted, waking him when he had almost drifted off, "I'm going to find you someplace warm but you have to stay with me, OK?!"

With her? Where did she think he was going? She was carrying him for crying out loud. And why would he want to go anywhere anyway. Emilia was the warmest, softest thing that he could imagine. Subaru felt like he could sleep here forever in perfect contentment.

Subaru was shaken awake again by a sudden falling sensation. Then he heard a sharp cracking sound as Emilia hit the ground. He blinked and realized that Emilia had leapt or fallen off of a tall hill and onto a vast frozen river.

She stood tensed for a moment, listening for further cracks but none came.

"Subaru! You said a river would lead me to a village! Which way do I go? Upstream or downstream?" Emilia gasped.

Subaru thought about it for a moment but his thoughts seemed to be going every which way. Instead of answering, he said: "How can you tell which way the river is flowing when it's frozen?" He asked curiously.

Emilia stiffened, and after a moment's hesitation, took off running full speed 'down' the river.

"We'll follow the river out of the forest! Then we can get you warm! Subaru, listen to me!" Emilia called out, not even breathing hard, "You need to stay awake! Stay with me! Tell me about... tell me about how your engine works!" She said desperately.

Subaru yawned, "The engine?" He asked vaguely. Why wouldn't Emilia just let him sleep?

"Yes! Explain to me how your engine thing works again!" Emilia shouted.

Subaru yawned and tried to snuggle deeper into Emilia's soft, warm neck, "I think maybe gasoline is involved..."

"Gas...oline?" Emilia struggled over the unfamiliar world.

"Sure, why not," Subaru replied. He didn't feel cold anymore, just very sleepy.

Subaru was dimly aware of Emilia having stopped running.

"Subaru, I think I see something. Just hang on, Subaru. Subaru? Subaru!" She cried out as Subaru finally drifted off to sleep.

"Lady Anastasia, I *implore* you to reconsider," Willard Pickett said with a hard edge in his voice. He was a short and extremely corpulent man dressed in a black pinstriped suit that would have befit a merchant or banker. "Your decision to try and reach an accommodation with Subaru Natsuki is causing... a great deal of upheaval in your faction!"

Pickett struggled his way up the steps to the royal palace using a burnished black cane. Because of his weight, Pickett was laboriously climbing each step with much cursing and Anastasia fought to curb her impatience as she and Julius politely waited by his side.

Anastasia checked a sighed. "I must admit, Guild-Master, I fail to understand the concern. Subaru Natsuki not only appears to be a shoe-in for the throne but his inventions are poised to transform the economy of the entire world! It seems to me that we are much better off being on board for this little ride than in trying to stand against it," Anastasia replied, trying to placate this unassuming man who was actually the head of the Lagunican merchant association and one of the most powerful merchants in the world. He had come out as a strong advocate for Anastasia's coronation and they had always agreed upon major policies before.

They did not agree now.

"I am extremely interested in his inventions," Willard admitted. "However, it is his other policies that concern me."

"Concern you in what way?"

"He plans to empty the slums!" Willard pointed out.

Anastasia's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "And... wouldn't that be a good thing?" She asked mildly.

"No one feels for the dust rats in the slums more than I," Willard said briskly. "Their situation is truly lamentable, but I must represent my constituents *including* the Lagunican craftsmen guild. They depend on that cheap labor! If the slums were emptied or if the population was even substantially reduced, their profits would crumble! We would lose most of our manufacturing sector as they struggled to make ends meet! The economic upheaval would be an unmitigated

disaster for the entire country!"

Anastasia carefully counted to ten before replying. "It'll certainly be an upheaval. But my discussions with Subaru Natsuki seem to indicate that he understands that and that he can be persuaded to act cautiously and provide sufficient stimulus to avoid the pain to the manufacturing sector that you were describing. We discussed significant work orders for a new infrastructure plan for Lagunica during our last talk."

"Fascinating," Willard said perfunctorily. "Nonetheless, the new paradigm has nothing to recommend it and the current paradigm has worked for my constituents to perfect satisfaction for centuries. Disrupting this paradigm is an unacceptable risk to our profits. We can not approve."

"Nothing to recommend it?" Anastasia echoed in a chill voice.

"Aside from improving the lives of a few persons of no importance," Willard admitted.

"Master Pickett," Anastasia said, fighting for patience, "Have you forgotten that I myself lived on the streets and ate out of trash cans until I managed to claw my way out?"

"I am entirely aware of this, Lady Anastasia. That is why I thought you'd be the first to agree that the slum dwellers can certainly make a similar achievement."

"With an *overwhelming* slice of luck, maybe," Anastasia sighed. "Master Pickett, all morality aside, we are discussing a program with enormous economic benefits for the entire country. Finding well-paying jobs for the slum dwellers increases our customer base by a staggering degree and raises the demand for both necessities and luxury goods. Profits will surge! I am not unaware nor am I insensitive to the plight of the manufacturing sector and I plan to work out a mutually beneficial agreement with Subaru Natsuki to ensure the stability of that sector before offering him any support."

"We do *not* find this acceptable, Lady Anastasia!" Willard gasped for breath as they finally reached the top of the steps to the royal palace. "The slum dwellers will remain where they are and service us as they always have. That is my final word on the subject."

Anastasia took this like a slap in the face and her jaw dropped. Before she could respond, Willard had turned his back on her and shuffled painfully away.

"Lady Priscilla, I really do need to speak with you," Lord Zyst said in an annoyed voice. Lady Priscilla reclined on a lounge chair in a small side chamber of the royal palace. Al sat nearby, carefully peeling oranges for his lady to eat.

Zyst was a tall, thin man with a pallid face and no more hair on his head than an egg. He was a member of the royal assembly and the leader of the Mages' Circle, an organization that trained all the powerful magic users of the kingdom. He'd become an early supporter of Priscilla, largely out of fascination with her strangely potent luck.

"About what?" She asked in a bored tone.

"Your attempt to... offer your hand to Subaru Natsuki," Zyst grumbled.

Priscilla laughed. "Oh, did I dash your hopes? Did you lie awake at night dreaming about me?"

"Not as such, Lady Priscilla," Zyst growled, fighting for calm. "I'm more concerned about your decision not to continue *fighting* Subaru Natsuki."

Priscilla's normally haughty visage became contemplative. "It is a strange sort of situation. I've never admitted defeat before," Priscilla mused, "But perhaps it's all for the better this way. Lady Anastasia and I have discussed Subaru Natsuki's latest machine at some length. This 'engine' will literally change the world! I expect that Lagunica will come to completely dominate the continent within ten years. I intend to be queen of the entire world, Zyst. What's the problem?"

"The problem, Lady Priscilla, deals with these machines themselves," Zyst explained. "They appear poised to replace a large amount of labor currently performed by magic and enchantments. Worse, my sources indicate that they work off of cheap mana crystals."

"So?"

"Charging a mana crystal with magic is not terribly difficult, Lady Priscilla. It requires a minimum of training compared to the years and decades of study that we insist on from established mages of the circle."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Priscilla asked, sounding not terribly interested.

Zyst closed his eyes and seemed to count to ten. "Lady Priscilla," He said very slowly, as if speaking to an infant. "This will take a large amount of professional work from our mages and put it into the hands of a group of ignorant hedge-wizards who have never been trained and are willing to work for coppers. It will lead to a race to the bottom for the price of magic in this country. My people are rightly concerned."

Priscilla laughed. "So you're worried about losing your monopoly, is that it?"

Zyst ground his teeth. "Yes, Lady Priscilla, that is exactly it."

"Oh, you poor dear," She mocked. "But then, politics does select winners and losers, doesn't it? I'd suggest that you do everything you can to be on the winning side. *I* always am."

"Trust me, Lady Priscilla, I will," Zyst said in a chill voice before walking away.

Subaru woke up sometime later, lying in bed. Something warm and soft and wonderful was lying on top of him.

"Emilia?" He asked groggily.

They were under a heavy blanket in a small bed, someplace that Subaru didn't recognize. They were both naked.

"Subaru!" Emilia whispered, her eyes streaming tears. She was crying as she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him tight.

"Mili, believe me, this is a wonderful way to wake up but I still need to breathe!" He giggled, feeling almost drunk.

Tears were flowing down her face, "You were so cold! I was afraid that..."

"I don't feel cold," Subaru assured her, holding her closer, "You feel so wonderful," He murmured, wondering if maybe he could go back to sleep for a bit, "I want to wake up like this everyday."

"Huh?"

"Didn't we used to sleep together?" Subaru asked absently.

"Err... Subaru, of course we did!"

"Oh, that's just wonderful!" Subaru smiled.

Emilia was staring down at Subaru with a combination of confusion and concern, "Subaru, do you feel alright?"

"I feel super," Subaru assured her with his eyes closed, "I'm in bed with the most beautiful woman in the world." He giggled. Then he thought for a moment, "Hey, Mili, where did you find a bed anyway?"

"Well..."

"Oh no!" Subaru moaned.

"What?! What is it?!"

"Mili, are we dead?"

"...No, Subaru. We are not dead."

"Oh, good. Well, we were bound to find some luck," Subaru murmured with a smile.

Emilia was silent.

"So where *did* the bed come from?" Subaru mumbled.

Emilia hesitated for a long time. "Subaru... This is... my house."

"Huh?"

"We... we aren't in Gusteko like we thought we were. This is the Elior Forest."

"I always wanted to come here," Subaru mused in a dreamy voice.

"You did? Why?"

Subaru heard her but her words drifted out of his spacey brain completely unprocessed. Subaru looked around the cottage. The cottage only had one room and there was a fire-pit built right in the middle which held a blazing fire. The furniture was crude and rustic but it was clean and homey. Subaru and Emilia lay on a small bed in a corner. There was a small table in the kitchen with four chairs and there was a column of shelves built into one the wall. The counter had a large number of cabinets and a sink that looked like it supported running water.

Subaru suddenly giggled. Everything felt wonderful right now. "Don't worry! Everything is going to work out! You should get some rest while I do some poking around. The first thing we need to do is figure out what happened to the spirits!"

Subaru tried to get out of bed but Emilia forcefully pushed him back down. "Subaru! There is a terrible storm raging outside and it is the middle of the night! We are not rushing off to rescue the spirits right now!" Emilia declared.

Subaru looked up at Emilia in shock. Emilia's normally peaceful expression was as hard as iron.

Wow. I've never seen her like this. It's almost like she's daring me to argue with her.

"But-" He murmured.

"The storm is still raging outside, Subaru," Emilia continued in a more conciliatory tone, stroking his cheek. "We can't go anywhere tonight. You almost froze to death in this storm once already. If you die then the spirits die with you."

Subaru stared up at Emilia as if he was struggling to follow what she was saying. "I feel like maybe we should go rescue them. Do we... know where they are?" He tried to remember.

Emilia bent down and gave him a tender kiss. "Tomorrow, Subaru. Tomorrow."

Subaru closed his eyes. He tried to pull his thoughts together but it was like raking leaves in a windstorm. "Hey, Mili, can I have another kiss?"

Subaru didn't open his eyes but he felt Emilia bend down and give him a soft and tender kiss.

"Oh, that's wonderful," He said. "I love your kisses, Milli. They are to me what water is to a man dying of thirst," He started giggle as if this had been a great joke.

Emilia stared at him in concern. "Subaru, you're warm now but you're still acting very funny."

"You have that effect on me, sometimes," Subaru admitted with a yawn.

"Hm. Maybe I should try to find you some food," Emilia murmured, starting to get up.

"No!" Subaru protested, grabbing and pulling the startled girl back down on top of him and wrapping himself around her as if she were a teddy bear, "Stay here! I'll be lonely if you go," He whined.

"...Alright," Emilia said slowly.

"Mili, can we stay like this forever?" Subaru murmured plaintively.

"...Maybe?" Emilia replied.

Subaru drifted back off to sleep.

Emilia stayed beside Subaru until she was certain that he was deep asleep. Then she bundled Subaru up under the blankets and pulled her clothes back on.

I need to make us something to eat. I certainly can't go foraging in this storm. I shouldn't leave Subaru alone for long right now anyway.

Emilia started opening cabinets in the small cottage.

This is bad. I'm nearly out of food. All I have left is a few preserved roots and vegetables.

Subaru's been sick. He needs food.

Although, I suppose he can't eat while he's asleep anyway.

Emilia returned to Subaru's side and gently took his hand.

She jumped and dropped it.

Oh Gods, he's burning up! He felt like ice just a few hours ago and now he feels like a furnace! But Subaru is also shivering. Is that because maybe it's too cold in here?

I've never tried to take care of someone who was sick. Do I try to keep him warm or help him cool off? What do I do?!

If Subaru almost froze to death then maybe I should climb back into bed with him and keep him warm? But is that the right thing? Maybe I should start taking his blankets off and help him cool down?

But he got sick because he was out in the cold! Maybe cooling him off would make him worse! Gods! I don't know what to do! Daddy, why aren't you here when I need you?!

A small, nasty voice in Emilia's mind answered her, *You know exactly why. Because he turned his back on you. He disowned you. He's Subaru's Daddy now. He wished that you were dead so that you couldn't hurt Subaru anymore. Even now, when you're the only one that Subaru has, you have no idea how to help him. You are completely useless.*

Emilia shook her head violently, trying to shake off those poisonous thoughts.

You are nothing but a helpless little girl, The nasty voice continued. All that you're capable of is making other people miserable. You cursed your own family because you couldn't deal with the terror of the attack on the Forest, you allowed yourself to be trapped inside the Sanctuary because you were blind to Roswaal's scheming, and you lost all control of your magic and you absolutely would have killed Felt and Subaru if Puck and Beatrice hadn't saved them. You are the most pathetic woman on the face of this world.

Tears welled up in Emilia's eyes but she angrily wiped them away. *No! I have to be more than that! I have to. Like it or not, Emilia, Subaru is depending on you. He needs you! You are all that Subaru has so you will have to be enough.*

She felt his forehead again.

I feel like he was shivering less when I was in bed with him earlier so maybe that's a sign that I need to keep him warmer?

Subaru moaned briefly but said nothing else.

Subaru. I'm so sorry for everything. I never meant for any of this to happen.

Subaru gave a great hacking cough that sounded wet and congested.

Emilia watched Subaru choke and struggle to breath through lungs full of fluid. She slid onto the bed and helped Subaru sit up. She laid his head against her shoulder and gently stroked his hair.

This probably isn't the most comfortable position, but at least he seems to be breathing easier.

And it might be my imagination but I think me rubbing his head is making him calmer.

Emilia cuddled the unconscious Subaru close.

Emilia wearily shook her head. *I'm exhausted. I'm about to pass out. I need to close my eyes for a few minutes.*

Emilia jerked awake, unaware that she had ever fallen asleep. She looked out the window. The sun would rise in a few hours.

That means I slept through the rest of the night and almost clear through to morning...

Emilia climbed out of bed, being careful not to wake Subaru. The fire had gone out and the house was freezing.

Emilia gently brushed his forehead. He felt a little warm but at least that terrible fever was gone.

Emilia tried to start the fire. She knelt by the wood pile and picked up a few pieces of dusty old logs with a dispirited expression.

I need to keep Subaru warm. I could start a fire with the leftover firewood I have here but it will never last all day, much less through tonight or tomorrow. I'll need to find more firewood. This cottage wasn't designed to be insulated against supernatural cold, and it certainly was never intended to house someone who can't use their natural mana to stay warm. I'll need to keep the fire burning and that means I need to find more firewood and start drying it out as soon as possible.

The problem is the village woodshed is empty. I'd emptied it the 'winter' that Roswaal came to find me and I'd intended to refill it during the 'spring' when the forest's cold wasn't so intense and I wouldn't have needed a fire to stay warm. But I wasn't here to look for firewood in the spring because I left the forest with Roswaal!

Wait, what about the old storage shed on the other side of the forest? I think that the villagers left it fully stocked before... the accident. The wood must be dried out by now!

It's a long walk though. I might be gone all day, especially if I stop to find more wood to restock the shed for later.

Emilia gave Subaru's sleeping body a dubious glance.

As she watched, he shivered.

She shook her head. *I need to chance it. I have to keep Subaru warm.*

Subaru looks like he might sleep for a few more hours. So if I'm going to go, this is the best time.

Emilia quickly kindled a fire with some of the remaining wood.

Emilia walked out the door but she only got a few steps before she froze in her tracks.

Emilia! You are so stupid! Remember what Daddy told you the other day? What Subaru told you yesterday? If Subaru wakes up and you're not here, he'll panic! He might even venture back out into the forest looking for you! You need to leave him a note!

Emilia raced back inside and rummaged through Subaru's satchel looking for paper and something to write with. She felt around in the satchel. She found the 'cell phone' and a set of keys strung on a strange charm bangle that must have been Subaru's mementos of his home world. She touched Puck's gem and pulled her fingers away quickly as if it pained her.

Emilia frowned, pulling a small black book out of the satchel. *What is this?* Emilia thought. *I've never seen this before but... something tells me that it's dangerous...*

Emilia carefully opened the book and looked at the first page. A moment later she flinched and slammed the book shut.

I can't read whatever language this is written in. Maybe it's from Subaru's world? Just staring at these letters is giving me a bad headache. She closed her eyes for a moment as the room spun around her. She shook her head, trying to clear it.

Emilia flipped through the strange book until she found a blank page at the end and tore it out.

Emilia shut the book and put it down on the table. Emilia felt a strong urge to wipe her hands on her skirt. She did this several times but her hands still felt oily to her.

I need to ask Subaru about this book when he wakes up...

She quickly wrote a note. *'Dear Subaru, I am going to the storehouse outside the western glade to gather firewood. I should be home sometime late tonight. If you wake up, just stay here. Storms can spring up very suddenly in the forest and I can manage the cold much better than you can. Please don't worry about me. I used to go to the glade for firewood all the time so there is no danger to me and I know how to stay clear of all the mabeasts, most of whom are in the northern part of the forest anyway. I will be home as soon as I can. Stay in bed!'* Emilia underlined the last sentence three times.

"Love, Emilia," She finished, leaving the note on the table.

Thinking that she had finally taken care of everything, Emilia left the house and raced off to find firewood. She quickly vanished into the forest.

A few minutes after Emilia left, the cottage door opened again.

Someone entered the house, calmly closing the door behind them.

They looked at the table, reading Emilia's note.

Then they noticed the book.

Subaru first knew he was awake when he realized that he was in sheering pain. Every muscle in his body ached.

Subaru's eyes fluttered open. He was in a bed, someplace that he'd never seen before.

"Emilia?" Subaru called in a hoarse croak. He shook his head, trying to clear it but his mind felt fuzzy.

Subaru looked around the small cottage but Emilia wasn't there.

He noticed a piece of paper on the otherwise empty table nearby.

Maybe Emilia left me a note? Subaru thought blearily as he struggled to get out of the bed and to his feet.

It took Subaru several tries to get up. His legs didn't seem to want to support him, they felt rubbery and wobbled under him. His body felt as if it had been taken apart and put back together inside out. Subaru laboriously took the three steps to the table and leaned on it, stopping to catch his breath. Then he bent down and inspected the note.

Subaru frowned. Reading was challenging right now. He had to read the note several times before he was able to parse the message.

"Subaru, I am in danger. The mabeasts are approaching the cottage. I will draw them away. Please follow my trail and come find me as soon as you can."

Subaru's heart stopped. *The mabeasts?! Why would they come here?!*

Fuck! Maybe the mabeasts I 'tamed' slipped the leash or something! What if they came here looking for revenge?! Emilia must have decided that she couldn't risk moving me so she tried to lead the mabeasts away from here!

Fuck! I have to find her!

Subaru wrestled with his clothes trying to put them on. His range of motion was extremely limited and he struggled to get his arms into his shirt sleeves.

Finally, Subaru limped out of the cottage door. His steps were short and each one threatened to unbalance him. The sun had set and the cold was bitter. The wind howled and it was hard to tell if it was still snowing or if the snow was just being blown everywhere.

He leaned against the door frame, panting for breath. He appeared to be in a village of some kind but there was no time to inspect it. He quickly scanned the surrounding houses and saw that the chimneys were barren of smoke and there were no lights visible. For whatever reason, the village was clearly deserted. Looking for help here would be a waste of time.

Subaru saw a single trail of footprints leading away from the cottage.

Buck up, Subaru! Emilia needs you! This is no time to stay sick in bed like a kid with a runny nose!

Subaru closed the door behind him and fell onto his hands and knees in the snow. Subaru struggled back to his feet and grabbed a nearby fallen tree branch to use as a walking stick. He lurched like a cripple through the abandoned village as he fought his way through the deep snowbanks.

From far back in the trees, a figure watched him go.

Come on! Subaru thought to himself. *Get moving!*

Subaru lurched through the forest, clinging to his makeshift walking stick, following Emilia's tracks in the snow. Willpower alone kept him moving. His entire body ached and every painful stumble threatened to unbalance him and send him face down into the snow. As much as it galled him to waste time when Emilia was in danger, Subaru forced himself to move slowly and deliberately. Getting to Emilia slowly was better than not getting there at all and if Subaru fell down in the deep snow, he truly feared that he would be unable to get back up again.

After over an hour of struggling through the snow, Subaru had gone less than two miles.

Subaru heard thunder in the distance. Great booming explosions and flashes of lighting echoed through the forest. Far off in the distance, he watched a huge tree fall.

Lightning?! In this cold?! Wait, can you even get lightning in a winter storm? I've never seen any. Not sure if that means it's impossible though. I'll ask Emilia about it when I find her. I have way more important problems right now!

Fuck me. I can't even enter Reason and Judgment right now. Every time I try, the world slows down and then speeds up again and my head feels rubbery and I want to throw up!

Maybe I've strained or overused the Authority somehow? Is that possible?

Subaru shook his head, lurching along like an old man with a cane.

At least Emilia's tracks are easy to follow.

Subaru stopped.

Wait a second. If these are Emilia's tracks... then where are the mabeasts' tracks? If Emilia is fleeing from mabeasts, or leading them away from the cottage, then where are the tracks from all the mabeasts chasing her?

Subaru leaned heavily on his branch. He shook his head, trying to concentrate but his brain felt as if it was packed in wool and his wits were scattered.

I don't get it. What is Emilia doing? My brain feels... fuzzy. I can't think straight. God, I wish that I could trigger Reason and Judgment right now!

Could I have misunderstood her note? How? It said explicitly, 'I'm in danger, please come find me' but in danger from what?

Something seems strange about all this.

Am I dreaming? No. Dreams rarely feature this much pain...

Subaru struggled onward a few more feet. Emilia's trail ended at the edge of a frozen river.

Did she run down the river to avoid the snowdrifts? It would be much faster but which way did she go?

I'm just limping along here. I can't search both banks for miles in each direction. And should I keep following her tracks anyway? Emilia's tracks show that nothing was chasing her.

Could it be a flying mabeast? Like the stormcrow?

Subaru's heart momentarily stopped but after a moment he shook his head.

Even a stormcrow would leave some tracks when it tried to grab its prey off the ground. Besides, if Emilia was fleeing from something that flew, she wouldn't run out onto the river. There's no cover out there. The way to hide from a flying predator is to run into denser woods and thick underbrush where you're protected.

Should I go back? I know the note said that Emilia was in danger but I don't see how. And why would she leave a note telling me to come find her without saying where she was going?

And if she meant to leave me a trail so that I could follow her, why travel down the river where she'd leave no tracks?

Oh God, my head hurts. I feel like I could collapse at any moment.

Subaru stood there for a long moment, panting and shivering.

Well, whatever is going on, I need to find Emilia. I can't just go back to bed while there's any doubt in my mind that she's safe.

Reason and Judgment would be super useful right now. Too bad it's not cooperating at the moment. Well, we'll have to make do with what we have. Maybe I can spot some sign of her passing if I look around carefully.

Subaru shielded his eyes against the falling snow and peered at the far side of the river. *Are those more tracks? Emilia's tracks? I can't tell from here.*

OK, I need to find Emilia. She's in trouble somehow, although apparently nothing was chasing her. But I need to be careful. This hill down to the riverbank is steep and it's covered in fresh, powdery snow.

Subaru began to climb down toward the riverbank. He tried to be careful but he'd only gone about three steps down the incline when his makeshift cane slid out from under him and he fell flat on his back. The entire snowy hillside gave way

under Subaru in a mini-avalanche and he was swept down the hill and thrown onto the hard ice with an impact that knocked the wind out of him.

Subaru lay there stunned for a long moment before bursting into a painful coughing fit. He struggled to hack something up. What he finally spat out on the frozen river was black and red and had the consistency of hot tar.

OK. That's not encouraging...

Subaru tried to plant his walking stick on the ice to climb up off the frozen river but the broken off branch's bottom was uneven and the branch kept slipping away when he tried to put his weight on it.

In desperation, Subaru tried to crawl to the river edge. His legs didn't seem to want to function anymore so he used his arms to physically drag himself across the ice. Subaru's entire body was spread out across the thick, hard ice. The cold was shocking and the chill penetrated his body all the way down to his core.

Got to keep moving...

Subaru fought for every inch of progress he made. He gasped for breath for every meter.

About halfway across, he paused and panted for breath. His eyes grew heavy.

No! Don't stop! If you stop here, you will die, understand?! This wind and the cold ice will kill you just as easily as that frozen lake would have! It's just a little slower to do it. Fall asleep here and you will never wake up again.

Emilia is in danger!

Subaru bit his lip and continued to drag himself to the shore.

Emilia returned to the cottage that evening carrying almost a dozen small, dried logs in her arms. She was carrying so many logs that she couldn't see where she was going.

Maybe this wasn't smart. Carrying this much wood saved me from having to make two trips but the one trip I made took all day! Going back to the cottage several times would have been better because it means I could have checked on Subaru. What's worse is this really isn't all that much wood. It might last us a few days but not much more. I'll need to go back and get more wood tomorrow.

She heard thunder in the distance. *Lightning? In the forest? We never get lightning here. This must be a bad storm.*

Emilia fumbled with the doorknob. She struggled to support the stacked logs with one knee while she opened the door.

Emilia crept into the cottage as quietly as possible, trying not to disturb Subaru's rest.

She tried to gently lower the logs onto her nearly empty wood pile but at the last moment, her arm spasmed and the entire pile tumbled to the ground with a thunderous crash.

Emilia flinched with a guilty expression on her face. "Sorry, Subaru," She murmured, looking at the bed.

Subaru wasn't there.

Her eyes widened in shock. *Where is Subaru?! Did he leave me a note?!*

Emilia sprang to the table and checked the note.

Her face twisted in horror. *What?! I didn't write this! Someone changed my note! And that means that someone else is in the forest and that they're trying to lure Subaru into a trap!*

I need to find Subaru!

Emilia raced out of the cottage and froze in her tracks, her face completely baffled.

The cottage was surrounded by clean, virgin snow.

What? Where are Subaru's tracks?! Where are my tracks from this morning? We've had nothing but flurries all day so at least my tracks from when I left the house earlier today should still be here.

But they're not. All the tracks are gone! The only tracks here are the ones that I just made coming back to the house. What could have done this?!

Emilia scanned the area frantically for some sign of Subaru's passing but there was nothing but clean, unmarked snow.

Emilia buried her face in her hands. *Think, Emilia! For once in your blasted life, think! Pretend that you're smart like Subaru. If you were Subaru, what would you have done?!*

Alright... So the person that I love left me a note that said they were in danger... So I leave the cottage and follow their tracks?

But my tracks are gone.

Emilia paced back and forth in the open doorway, biting her lip. *I need to find Subaru! Someone else is clearly in the*

forest and they mean him harm. Subaru is already very sick. The chill in the air alone could kill him! I need to find him right away! What do I do?!

Maybe... Maybe whatever erased our tracks did so after Subaru left? It would make sense since his tracks are gone too. That means maybe he really did follow my trail. I didn't come back the same way I went to the storehouse so I easily could have missed him!

That's it! That's what I'll do! Anything is better than just waiting around here!

Emilia leaped from the cottage then abruptly stopped, smacking her palm against her forehead. *The note, Emilia! Fix the note! Maybe whoever changed it will come back and change it again but trying to fix the note is better than nothing!*

Emilia ran back inside and quickly sketched out a new message on the same paper. *'Subaru. I am not in danger. Someone forged my note. I am going to try and find you. If you get back before me, please stay here. Someone is in the forest and I'm worried that they might try to hurt you.'*

Emilia then flew out the door and vanished into the storm.

Subaru was gasping and trembling violently when he finally reached the riverbank.

Subaru planted his cane into the frozen snow. This time it held his weight. Subaru slowly climbed back to his feet, using the cane to support him.

Finally, Subaru was back on his feet. His entire body trembled and he wondered if another step or two would be all that it would take to send him down again. His body was numb and it wouldn't stop shivering.

I've lost all my body heat from lying on that ice. I don't think that I'm strong enough to warm my own body in this storm. I'm certainly not dressed for it.

If I don't get someplace warm soon, I've had it.

Not important. I need to find Emilia. I can't die until she's safe.

There was a steady thudding sound from down river.

Subaru's eyes wouldn't focus but in the distance he saw a great black form charging toward him through the snow. It was moving fast and kicking up a great cloud of snow in its wake.

Another mabeast...

Could I use Pridebreaker on this mabeast?

Subaru tried to tap into his Authority but his body just trembled and his stomach swam.

I'll take that as a no. I can't trigger Reason and Judgment right now and just the thought of trying to use Pridebreaker again makes me want to collapse.

I'm not even sure that I can use Indomitable right now. This is bad.

Emilia raced through the forest at top speed, trying to retrace her path toward the storage shed.

She's only gone a small part of the distance when she stopped and shook her head.

No tracks...

...I don't think that Subaru could have gone this far anyway. Subaru was very sick. He couldn't have walked very far. Even when he's healthy he can't move very well in this snow.

What do I do?

...I should head back toward the village. I'll make a big circle around the village a few miles around. Then I'll make a spiral pattern back to the village until I run into his tracks.

Emilia leaped down onto the ice and sped down the river. Her gaze swept the forest, frantically looking for any sign of Subaru's passing. She froze in shock as a colossal fork of lightning flashed across the sky. Strangely, this lightning seemed to have leaped up from the distant hills.

Emilia shook her head. *No time to worry about this now.* She kept running.

She'd only gone a short distance down the river when she heard a piercing scream coming from a glade to her right.

"Subaru!" She gasped and bolted off into the glade.

The great black beast was thundering toward Subaru in a massive spray of snow.

It's too big to be a wolgarm but too small to be a Guiltylowe. What the heck is it?

Subaru fought to stand erect.

Don't lean on your staff. Animals prey on the sick and the lame and right now you're both.

Can you use Indomitable? You can't risk testing it if you might need to use it in ten seconds.

OK! You don't know if you can break this mabeast into pieces but don't give him any reason to doubt it! Bluff, Subaru! Make him back down.

Subaru took a deep breath as the creature raced up to him and then... came to a stop.

Subaru looked up in shock as the velociraptor-shaped beast bent over and nuzzled his head.

"Um. Hi?" Subaru whispered.

The black riding dragon made a variety of clucking noises that sounded as if the beast was very pleased with itself.

"Wait. You're the earth dragon that brought me and Beatrice to the Sanctuary. How the hell did you get here?" Subaru breathed in amazement. "Am I hallucinating?"

The dragon nudged him and Subaru nearly fell down into the snow. Only a wild grab for the riding dragon's harness saved him.

Subaru leaned against the black riding dragon, panting for breath. He saw a long shallow cut running down the dragon's shoulder.

"What happened to you, girl?" Subaru asked. "Did you get hurt?"

The dragon gave a moaning sound and looked off into the forest with a worried expression.

"Did something try to attack you?" Subaru prodded.

The dragon gave a long shiver that rattled her scales and moaned again.

Subaru shook his head. "Well... much as I wish you could talk right now, maybe you can still help me. Emilia is missing and I think that she's in danger. Can you help me find her? Are you OK for a ride?"

The dragon snorted.

Subaru made a face. "OK... you actually look kind of offended by that question... Wow. Now I'm worried that you can understand what I'm saying. I need to ask Emilia about that-"

Subaru's eyes widened and he shook his head. "Emilia! Right. We need to go!"

Subaru tried to raise his leg into the dragon's stirrup and completely missed. He tried it two more times with identical results and then leaned heavily against the dragon, trying to catch his breath and trembling.

The dragon unexpectedly sank to her knees in the snow and Subaru suddenly found himself falling. Subaru landed full on her saddle in an impact that knocked the wind out of him.

The dragon clucked, sounding concerned.

Subaru finally caught his breath. "Thanks, girl," He whispered with a weak smile. "I'm not feeling my best right now."

With the dragon's help, Subaru mounted the beast and she stood up, shaking off the snow.

"OK, girl," Subaru whispered. "Are you ready?"

The dragon looked back at him and clucked with a worried expression as if to say: *I am but I don't know about you!*

Subaru was still panting for breath as he nudged the dragon's sides and she took off at a run.

Emilia tore her way through the frozen underbrush, following the scream. She began to hear growls.

She burst into a wide clearing that was dominated by a huge dead tree. Dozens of mabeasts, both wolgarm and Guiltylowe, prowled around the tree, leering up into its boughs. Emilia saw a girl perched helplessly in its branches at least twenty feet up.

The girl was human and around Felt's age. She had dark red hair set in a French braid and she was wearing a blue hooded cloak as well as brown pants and a white shirt. She sat shivering in the freezing wind. She desperately hugged the tree and her skin looked blue even from a distance. Tiny ice patches were clearly visible on her clothes.

Emilia saw a body lying in the snow. A corpse that was so torn up by the mabeasts that he was barely recognizable as having been human. Next to him, Emilia saw the frozen carcass of a white riding dragon that seemed to have been disemboweled but otherwise uneaten.

The girl looked at Emilia and her face turned pale. Emilia realizes that her hood had fallen down and that the girl was seeing both her ears and her hair.

That girl was already terrified of being eaten by mabeasts. Now she thinks that the Witch of the Wood has come for dinner as well!

A huge Guiltylowe tried to climb up the tree, snapping at the girl.

She screamed in terror. She tried to climb higher and nearly lost her grip. She fell back down onto her branch, clutching it desperately.

The Guiltylowe scrambled up the trunk a good ten feet before it lost momentum and slid back down, its claws digging long tracks into the smooth trunk.

Emilia looked around the clearing. There were three Guiltylowe and two dozen wolgarm.

The girl gave a piercing scream as her numb hands finally let go and she fell backwards, landing in the deep snow, the impact knocking the breath out of her.

The mabeasts salivated and readied to pounce but Emilia sprang forward and the mabeasts were all staggered by an icy explosion and a huge spray of snow.

When beasts had finally wiped the snow from their faces, Emilia was standing in front of the girl, her hands crackling with cobalt energy.

"Leave her alone," Emilia said firmly.

The Guiltylowe roared and the girl scrambled backwards toward the tree but Emilia didn't move.

I can't handle this many mabeasts. Even if Daddy were here, I'm not sure if I could scare them all off.

But I can't just leave this girl to be eaten...

What can I do?

The mabeasts all growled but they didn't approach.

Emilia frowned.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a wolgarm slinking toward the girl from behind.

Emilia sprang around the girl and got between her and the wolgarm. The beast stopped in its tracks with a frustrated snarl.

However, now that Emilia wasn't between the girl and the other mabeasts, the three Guiltylowe started to prowl closer.

Emilia raced back toward the Guiltylowe. "Get away!" She shouted, with a crackle of cobalt lightning arcing between her fingers.

The Guiltylowe all roared and looked at Emilia with flinty hatred in their eyes but for some reason they didn't attack.

Emilia thought for a moment and then her eyes widened.

She looked down at the girl who was clearly debating whether she should be more afraid of the mabeasts or Emilia.

"Here. Let me help you," Emilia said, not giving the girl a chance to reply before scooping her up in her arms.

The girl gave a terrified squeak as Emilia cradled her against her chest like a baby.

Emilia gave the monsters a thin smile. "I know why you're holding back. You're the same mabeasts that Subaru enchanted yesterday. The ones that he told weren't allowed to hurt me. You know that if I get so much as a scratch, Subaru will tear you all apart. Well, I promise you, the only way you're getting your claws on this girl is to go through me so you had better go and find an easier meal."

The mabeasts snarled, all clearly furious. The largest Guiltylowe roared and gathered itself as it prepared to pounce.

Don't blink, Emilia!

The largest Guiltylowe gave a long rumbling growl that slowly faded away. Then its muscles gradually unclenched and it gave Emilia a look of profound hatred. The Guiltylowe hung it's head and began to slink away through the snow.

The other Guiltylowe and wolgarm followed their leader.

Emilia watched the mabeasts prowl out of sight. They vanished into the darkened woods with many looks of loathing cast back at Emilia. Emilia stood there staring into the dark, long enough to be sure that they were gone, as she held the trembling girl in her arms.

Emilia let out an explosive breath of air.

"Oh my," She whispered in relief. "I can't believe that worked!"

"Ah-Ah!" The girl whimpered against her chest.

Emilia started, having nearly forgotten about the girl she held. "Oh! Are you alright?" Emilia asked the girl.

The girl looked up at Emilia with huge eyes. Her teeth were chattering violently. "Ah-Ah-Are you going to ka-ka-cook me?!" She whispered.

Emilia blinked in shock. "No! Of course not!" Emilia shook her head with a sigh. "Listen, I know that I'm a silver haired half-elf but I promise you, I mean you no harm. We need to get you out of the cold!"

Emilia stared heading back to the village then froze in her tracks.

Wait! What about Subaru?! I can't just abandon him out here! But what do I do about the girl? If I don't get her someplace warm she might die! But if Subaru's out here he might be dying too! What do I do?!

"Lou-lou-look out!" The girl squeaked.

Emilia spun around and saw a huge monster racing into the clearing, churning up great clouds of snow.

She prepared to summon her magic but the beast slowed to a trot as it neared and then stopped altogether.

"A riding dragon?" Emilia murmured.

"Emilia," A voice croaked.

"Subaru!" Emilia raced to the dragon side and saw Subaru lying atop the riding dragon, barely conscious.

"Mili, are you OK?" He whispered.

"I'm fine, Subaru," She assured him. "I don't know who wrote that note but it wasn't me! I'm fine. We need to get you out of the cold! Subaru, where did you find the dragon?"

Subaru didn't respond.

Emilia frantically felt Subaru's face and it was as cold as the snow.

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted. She looked at the frightened girl in her arms. "Come on! We need to get you both out of the cold!"

Emilia grabbed the dragon's reins and the dragon obediently followed Emilia toward the village with Subaru on its back.

Emilia flew into the cottage, not bothering to shut the door, and gently placed the trembling girl in a chair.

"Ouch!" The girl hissed.

"Are you alright?" Emilia asked.

The girl winced. "I-I think I broke my arm falling o-out of the tree!" She confessed through chattering teeth.

Emilia bit her lip then raced back outside and took Subaru off the dragon's back and brought him inside. She quickly stripped him down.

"Wh-wh-whoah! I da-da-don't need to see t-that!" The girl squeaked in a barely audible voice as she turned her face away from Subaru's naked body.

Emilia ignored her as she gently tucked Subaru into bed.

"Let's see. What else can I do?" Emilia whispered, sounding frazzled. She quickly threw a few logs into the dying cinders of the fire pit and waved her hands over them.

The logs all exploded into brilliant flame.

The girl sighed in relief. She pulled her chair closer to the flames and held her frozen fingers out to the fire.

"Stay here!" Emilia instructed the girl, "I'll be right back!"

The girl nodded and Emilia raced back to the door and grabbed the reins of the dragon who seemed to be trying to squeeze through the door.

"Come along, girl," Emilia said gently. "There's an old stable in the village. I think that you'll like it there."

Emilia shut the cottage door.

The girl shook her head in disbelief. "Res-rescued from mabeasts by a wi-witch," She said as her aching muscles began to warm up next to the fire. "This is ja-just like the first act of 'Findláech of Ma-Ma-Moray.' My life ke-keeps getting more in-interesting. That's pra-probably a bad sign!"

The girl looked at the moaning, barely conscious Subaru. She slowly got up off her chair, grabbing it to steady herself and then fought her way over to the bed.

"Hey, are yo-you alright?" She asked, feeling his forehead and then opening his mouth and peering inside.

The girl shook her head as she finally stopped shivering. "Let's see. You have recently had hypothermia," She said with authority. "My sympathies. That's no fun. I also see signs of a secondary infection. Being out in that cold won't help either condition."

She began to rummage around in the bag slung at her side. She paused and her face turned white. "Oh no. Don't tell me I lost it. I couldn't have lost it!" He whispered in horror.

Subaru slowly opened his eyes and looked up at her. His eyes struggled to focus on her as if he stared at her from across a great distance. "Why?" Subaru whispered. "Tell me why?"

"Why what?" The girl asked in a very distracted tone as she continued to frantically comb through her small bag.

She wasn't sure if he had even heard her. "I tried to help you," He whispered. "I got you out of the slums. I tried to get your grandfather and all your friends out of the slums too. I brought you to court. I thought... that we were friends," Subaru whispered in anguish.

The girl wasn't sure what he was talking about. "OK, buddy, you clearly have me confused with somebody else but I'm sure that whatever you're talking about, it was all a big misunderstanding."

Subaru shook his head. "Felt, you knew that I loved her. You knew. But you tried to take her away from me. Why? Was I really asking too much? All I wanted was to be left alone..."

The girl bit her lip and finally abandoned searching her bag for something that was clearly not there. "OK, listen buddy, I'm not whoever you think I am but we have much bigger problems right now. You've got signs of a recent fever and I'm pretty sure that fever is about to come back. We'll need to get you some medicine."

She pulled out some dried herbs out of her backpack. "Luckily, I have the ingredients to cook you some. Just relax, I'll mix you up something that will make you feel better. Let's see if I can find a pot to cook in."

The girl took a nervous look at the door. "Of course, that's always assuming that this witch isn't out there looking for a pot big enough to cook *both* of us right now..."

A few minutes later, Emilia came back to the cottage and found the girl sitting cross-legged by the fire pit, stirring a small pot that hung over the fire.

The girl started as Emilia quietly closed the door. She stood up, holding her right arm awkwardly across her body.

Emilia looked at the girl for a moment then shook her head and dismissed her from mind. Emilia quickly walked to Subaru's side and sat down on the bed beside him.

"Subaru. Are you alright?" She whispered, brushing his forehead.

Subaru did not respond.

"Um," The girl muttered.

Emilia turned around.

The girl looked awkward. "Yeah, hi," The girl said with a half hearted wave. "I think that your friend is sick with a fever so I'm cooking up some medicine. I had a few spare herbs in my pack."

Emilia frowned. "Are you sure that you know what you're doing?" She asked.

The girl looked offended. "Uh, yeah! Why? Because I'm so young? For your information, I've been studying medicine for half of my entire life!"

She certainly sounds proud of herself but 'half of her life' is not an impressive amount of time spent studying.

The girl blinked, suddenly looking worried. "Um. On the other hand, maybe I shouldn't be sassing the witch in her own cottage," She mumbled.

Emilia closed her eyes and sighed. "I imagine that I appear ungrateful for your help. If so, then I apologize because nothing could be further from the truth. If you can heal my Subaru then I will be deeply in your debt. I'm afraid that we've been... running for a long time now. Friends and enemies are beginning to look all too much alike to me..."

The girl gave Emilia an appraising look. "Yeah, I know what that feels like. You can call me Anri. Um, I know this is probably a rude question but are you really a witch?"

Emilia sighed. "My name is Emilia. Just Emilia. And no, I am not a witch. I'm simply a half-elf with... an unfortunate hair color. I mean you no malice."

Anri nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. I'd heard that all silver haired half-elves were witches but how the heck would that work? It's just a dumb generalization. It's like saying that all blonds are dumb."

Emilia chuckled. "Quite right," Emilia approved. "And I can disprove that theory right now. I know a blond girl named Felt and she is one of the most brilliant people I've ever met."

"Felt? Hey, that's the person that he was talking about in his sleep," Anri said gesturing toward Subaru.

"Really?" Emilia said intently. "What did he say?"

"Well, it didn't make much sense," Anri admitted. "As far as I could tell, he thought that I *was* Felt. Do I look like her or something?"

Emilia looked Anri over. "No. Not at all, actually."

Truthfully, I suppose that's not completely true. Anri doesn't look anything like Felt but she does feel a good deal like her. She gives off the impression of a girl forced to grow up too fast and be an adult too soon. A girl who demands the respect due to an adult because she's been already forced to shoulder an adult's responsibilities.

Actually, those two might be great friends if they ever met.

Anri shrugged. "Well, I guess he's too sick to see very clearly right now. What's your friend's name anyway?"

"His name is Subaru," Emilia said with a tired smile. "And he is the man who will one day be my husband."

"Oh! Congrats!" Anri said as she stirred the medicine. Then Anri paused with a frown. "Subaru. That's a weird name. I feel like I've heard it somewhere before..."

Emilia bit her lip. "We who dwell in the Elier Forest have somewhat unusual names," Emilia replied quickly. "It's simply a part of our culture."

Emilia, you are so stupid! Why would you tell Anri Subaru's real name?! Have you ever even heard of another Subaru?! Anri is going to leave the forest and immediately figure out who you both are! She could tell absolutely everyone where you're hiding!

Well, maybe not. Maybe we can convince her to keep our secret...

"Huh. I didn't even know that anyone lived in this forest at all," Anri muttered as she pulled a small bag of powder out of her pack and poured it into the pot. "Folks claim that it's haunted."

Emilia bowed her head. "There used to be many of us living here but it's just been me and my father for a very long time now."

"Oh. That's really sad," Anri murmured sympathetically. She put down her stirring spoon and reached into her pack. She pulled out a small baguette.

"Hungry?" Anri asked, tearing off a bite with her teeth.

"Famished," Emilia admitted. "Subaru and I haven't had a good meal in days."

"I know what *that* feels like!" Anri reached into her bag and pulled out another baguette and tossed it to Emilia.

Emilia caught it and bowed her head. "Thank you so very much."

Anri chuckled. "Well, you did save me from dying in the storm. And dying to mabeasts. I think that sharing a loaf of bread is the *very* least I could do."

"Still, thank you very much," Emilia said earnestly as she began to devour the bread.

"Were you guys lost in the woods too?"

Emilia nodded. "We were wandering for several days. Subaru got deathly sick after falling into a frozen lake."

Anri shuddered. "That's terrible! Why did you go out on a frozen lake?"

Emilia sighed. "We were being chased by a Snow Blight."

Anri's eyes became huge. "A Snow Blight? I've heard of those monsters. The stories say that one could rip apart a small town all by itself! I'd be terrified if I encountered a demon like that out in the woods! How did you ever escape?"

Emilia found it in her to give Anri half a smile. "Don't worry. Subaru killed the Snow Blight. It won't be bothering anyone anymore."

Anri's jaw dropped. "What?!"

Emilia shook her head almost in wonder. *The terrible Snow Blight that I was so afraid of growing up... Puck and I always stayed far away from it...*

Now it's dead. Subaru and I killed it.

That seems so strange... This monster that I was so terrified of when I was younger and we killed it.

Even lost and hungry, exhausted and scared, when the Snow Blight attacked us, Subaru found a way to kill it. My Subaru can do anything! Emilia felt a surge of pride.

"Your friend... killed the Snow Blight?" Anri asked skeptically.

Emilia smiled. "Yes. We lured it out onto that frozen lake. Then Subaru broke the ice open. The monster drowned. Unfortunately, we also wound up falling in the lake." She shook her head. "Poor Subaru almost died from the cold."

Anri just stared at her. "Tricking and killing a Snow Blight, that's... an impressive achievement, Emilia. Knights would bring a small army to face a Snow Blight and the two of you killed it all alone."

Emilia sighed. "Subaru always told me that as long as we were together, we can do anything. But he always seems to be the one who ends up paying for it," She murmured.

She glanced at Subaru's sleeping form as she finished the bread. "I wonder if I could get him to eat something..."

"I wouldn't," Anri warned. "He's sleeping because his body is saying that it needs sleep. His body will wake him up when he needs food more than sleep. And that bread might be too heavy for him anyway. Maybe we can make him a broth or something..."

Emilia looked at the cabinets dubiously. "I'm not sure what I have to make soup with," She admitted. "I only have a few vegetables and roots left."

"What do you mean?"

"We... just got back here last night. We were gone for many months. I don't have much food left to cook with," Emilia said.

"Hm," Anri murmured, finishing her bread. "Sounds like you're due for a shopping trip."

"Maybe," Emilia said.

She makes a point. Going to town might be the best idea... It would let us stock up on provisions. Finding food in the forest was always challenging and now I'm foraging for two without Daddy's help. Finding enough food to feed us will be very difficult. If we went shopping in one of the local villages then we could stock up on supplies. We could at least buy enough to last us until Subaru is feeling better and we can work together to feed ourselves.

But it also gives us more exposure... If anyone were to recognize us, Reinhard and Felt might hear about it. They would certainly come to investigate and we'd be driven out of our last refuge. If we can't even hide in the Elio Forest than what's left? Do we flee over the border into Gusteko?

Well, at least the border isn't very far away. I actually think that the border cuts through part of the forest but where would we go in Gusteko? What would we do there? I've read that most people in Gusteko have a burning hatred of foreigners, much less demi-humans. Where could we possibly go that we would be safe?

Maybe we keep traveling west into Karagi?

"Miss Emilia," Anri said, startling Emilia out of her reverie. "Do you think you could do me a favor?"

"Of course. And please, it's just 'Emilia.'"

Anri pulled some pieces of wood and bandages out of her bag. "Would you mind setting my arm? I need to set it or it won't heal properly but it's *really* hard to set a bone with only one hand."

"I'm afraid that I don't know how to do that," Emilia replied, flushing.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll talk you through it."

Emilia struggled through the process of setting Anri's bone but Anri was patient and less than an hour later, Anri's right arm was splinted to her satisfaction and hung in a sling.

"Thanks, Emilia," Anri said, fussing with her bubbling brew.

"Does it hurt?" Emilia asked from her seat beside Subaru on the bed.

Anri gave her a broad smile. "Well, yeah but it sure feels a lot better than it did before you set it," Anri replied, pouring the mixture into a cup.

"Is it-?" Emilia asked.

"Yup! It's all ready!" Anri said, handing her the cup. "You'll want to hold him upright and give him just a little bit at a time so that he doesn't choke on it."

Emilia nodded seriously. She gently lifted Subaru up but his body was limp as a rag doll.

Anri helped tip his head back and Emilia lifted the cup to his lips and began giving him the medicine.

Subaru almost immediately began to cough.

"Slower!" Anri commanded at once. "A few drops at a time!"

Emilia nodded and slowed the flow from the cup to a trickle.

Subaru quieted.

"Anri, tell me, what brought you into the forest?"

"Oh," Anri chuckled. "That's a very long, very boring story. Say, Emilia, what do you think about making a shopping trip tomorrow? If you could bring me to one of the local towns I can probably buy some new transportation there and be out of your hair."

Emilia flushed guiltily. "Oh. Please, don't misinterpret my distraction as my wishing to be rid of you. I'm just very worried about Subaru."

"No, I get it. But I'm sure that you love birds want some time alone. What's the closest town to here anyway? Maybe I could walk there."

Emilia thought about it as the cup of medicine slowly emptied. "I think that the closest town is Rixum," She mused.

"Oh yeah. I've heard of that place. I should be able to find a ride to where I'm going from there. Is it far?"

"Not too terribly far," Emilia said after a moment's thought. "But it did always take me several hours to get there and I probably move much faster than you in the deep snow."

"Oh. That's annoying," Anri replied.

"As far as a shopping trip goes, I don't feel right leaving Subaru alone until he's a little better," Emilia continued.

"Of course! I understand," Anri said. "But I don't really think that he's all *that* sick. He's just been out in the cold too much. I think he'll be much better tomorrow, especially with that medicine I gave him. He might even wake up tonight if he's hungry."

Emilia frowned. "He must be feeling *very* hungry. All that we've been able to eat for days is a handful of Juniper berries."

"Wow. And I thought that I'd been living rough," Anri muttered uncomfortably. "Yeah, in that case, I'm betting that he'll probably wake up sometime tonight and be looking for food."

Emilia stood up and walked over to her cabinets. "What do I have left?" She said to herself as she opened the cabinets and began to pull out some dried herbs and vegetables.

"Just try to keep it light," Anri cautioned her. "Maybe a broth would be good. A stew is about as heavy as I'd try tonight."

"A stew," Emilia murmured, deep in thought. "Yes. I could make Mother Fortuna's stew!"

Anri craned her neck to look into Emilia's cabinets. "Um. Hey, this may be none of my business, Emilia, but it looks to me like your cupboard is pretty bare."

"Yes, it often is," Emilia agreed with a sigh. "I won't have much to work with tonight..."

"So maybe in the morning we should talk to your friend about making a shopping trip?"

"Of course," Emilia agreed, closing the cabinets. "Once Subaru is out of bed and feeling better, I'm certain that he'll be glad to discuss it. Subaru even found a riding dragon in the forest today. I... still don't understand *how* he managed to *do* that but it could make our trip to a town much easier."

"Better and better!" Anri approved.

"Where exactly are you trying to get to, Anri?" Emilia asked.

Anri rolled her eyes with a broad smile. "Man. It feels like I've been on the road forever! But I don't have much farther to go at least. Oh and hey, Emilia, I don't want to sound entitled or anything but is there anywhere around here that I could sleep tonight? Nothing personal but I don't know you guys all that well so I'd really rather not sleep with your man."

Emilia gave her an amused look. "You don't have to worry about that, Anri. Such an invitation would not be forthcoming."

Anri laughed. "OK! Nice to be on the same page! I've been sleeping on the ground lately anyway but I lost all my bed rolls in the forest. Is there any way that we could go back and try to pick them up?"

Emilia looked off in the distance, deep in thought. "We might be able to recover some of your possessions for you in the morning," She mused. "But for tonight, I think the easiest solution would be for you to sleep in Arche's house."

"Do you think that he'll be OK with it?" Anri asked.

Emilia smiled at Anri sadly. "He's... not around... right now."

Anri's smile flickered. "Oh. Well, I'm really grateful for your hospitality."

Emilia nodded. "Not at all. I'll show you where you can sleep tonight. Do you want any of the stew that I'm going to

cook?"

"Oh, thank you, Emilia, but no thanks. I'll be fine for tonight. I just really need some sleep."

Emilia nodded and walked to the door followed by Anri. "Arche's house isn't far. It's basically just across the way. Let's bring some wood for a fire as well. The cottage will be cold."

They left and Emilia shut the door behind her.

When Subaru woke up, he was back in the bed in the cottage. He was nice and cozy but every muscle in his body ached and he had a bad headache. His stomach was growling audibly but at least his head felt clear.

Subaru might have tried to climb out of bed but before he could, the door opened and Emilia walked back inside.

"Mili?" Subaru said in a croak.

"Subaru!" Emilia raced to his side. "Are you alright?!"

"Um," Subaru rotated his stiff neck and moved his arms and legs a little. "Yeah, I think so. Just a little stiff."

Subaru looked up at the clearly exhausted Emilia who was hovering anxiously over him. Subaru coughed. "Hey, Emilia, not to pry or anything but where the hell are we?"

Emilia looked at him strangely. "You... don't remember?"

"Um, no, I guess not."

Emilia looked away, "This is... my house..."

"What?" Subaru asked in confusion.

Emilia turned to face him, "We're not in Gusteko, Subaru. This is the Elior forest."

Subaru stared at her. "Wait. *What?*!"

"This is the Elior Forest, Subaru. Beatrice must have sent us into the far northwestern end of the forest where I almost never went because of all the mabeasts. I didn't recognize any of the landmarks while we were up there. I'm sorry, Subaru," She said.

"Emilia... that's crazy! Elior isn't all *that* far north of the capitol! How could we have been caught in a blizzard, it's almost summer time!"

Emilia hung her head in shame. "It's my curse," She murmured. "I cursed this forest with a spell of endless winter..."

"Oh. Right," Subaru said awkwardly. "I guess I never appreciated what that really meant..."

Emilia bowed her head in silence.

Subaru looked around. "So, this is your house?" He asked, trying to move the conversation past an awkward point. "It's nice!"

On a shelf next to the bed, Subaru saw a small cushion about the size of a shoe box. A smaller cushion like a pillow had been sewn on one end. It was crude but it clearly had been designed to mimic a normal bed.

"Emilia," Subaru said with a smile. "Was that Puck's bed?" He asked.

Emilia looked where Subaru was pointing and smiled ruefully. "Well, it was supposed to be. I made that bed for Puck right after he thawed me out of the ice! I spent weeks learning how to sew so that I could surprise him with it." She suddenly laughed. "He never even used it!"

"Damn. That's harsh," Subaru sympathized.

Emilia shrugged. "Puck always preferred to sleep in the crystal."

"So, Emilia, what happened? How did we get here? The last thing I remember was fighting the Snow Beast-"

"Snow Blight," She corrected.

"Whatever. Can I get the whole story?" He asked plaintively.

Emilia gave a weary chuckle. "After we fought the Snow Blight, you fell into the frozen lake."

"Hey, that was *not* my fault," Subaru pointed out.

"You were... freezing to death," Emilia remembered with a pensive expression. "I ran through the forest desperately trying to find help." She shook her head, "While I was running down a forest path I recognized a familiar grove of trees and realized that we weren't far from home. I brought you here as fast as I could. As chance would have it, I still had some firewood lying around."

"Lucky you recognized the place or we might be still lost in that storm," Subaru said glancing out a window where the wind was flinging huge amounts of snow everywhere.

"Subaru, don't even joke about that!" Emilia said sharply, "That whole experience was terrifying! Your skin felt like ice. If we'd been out in the storm for even another fifteen minutes, I think..."

"Well, we're here now and nice and toasty," Subaru changed the subject. "And at least for the moment, I think that we're safe. Reinhard and the Cult aren't likely to guess that we're hiding in the forest any time soon."

Emilia sighed.

Subaru thought for a moment. "Emilia, what was up with that note you left me?"

Emilia started. "Yes, the note," She whispered. She paused for a moment and then shook her head. "Subaru, I saw that note but... I didn't write it!"

Subaru blinked. "What?"

"I didn't write that note!" She repeated. "My note told you that I'd gone out to get firewood and that you should stay in bed. I have no idea what happened to that note."

"Wait. Then who wrote the note I found?"

"I don't know!"

The pair looked at each other helplessly.

Subaru glanced thoughtfully at the empty table. "Emilia, where did you move that note to?"

"I didn't move it anywhere," Emilia replied, lost in thought.

"Then where is it?"

Emilia looked at the table and started. "Wait! Where did it go?!"

Subaru rubbed his forehead. "OK! That makes even *less* sense! Why would anyone come back here and take the note *after* we'd both read it? What was the point?"

"I don't know," Emilia said in a small voice.

Subaru sighed. "Yeah. Me neither."

Emilia took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "Alright, Subaru, it's your turn now. What happened when you woke up?"

Subaru shrugged. "Well, there's not much to tell. I woke up and I saw a note on the table that said you were in danger so I rushed out of the cottage and tried to follow your tracks."

Emilia flinched.

Oh God. Only Emilia could look so guilty about a note that she didn't write.

Emilia blinked. "My tracks? Subaru, you saw tracks outside when you woke up?"

"Yeah. I followed your tracks toward the river," He answered.

Emilia frowned and seemed lost in thought. "Subaru, think carefully. Did you see any other sets of tracks when you left the cottage?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Just yours. Why?"

Emilia didn't answer right away. "I didn't go toward the river, Subaru. I was going toward the old storage shed, the other way."

Subaru looked confused. "I was following your tracks, Mili."

She shook her head. "No, you weren't, Subaru. Those weren't my tracks," She said in a worried tone.

"They were the only set of tracks out there, Mili!" Subaru insisted. "I didn't see any other tracks and, believe me, I looked carefully!"

"I *do* believe you, Subaru!" Emilia said earnestly. "When I got back from the storage shed, your tracks were gone too."

"What do you mean, 'gone?'"

"Gone! The only tracks outside the cottage when I came home were mine. After I found the fake note, I was frantically trying to find your trail but it was all clean, virgin snow. Your tracks and my tracks from this morning were both gone. For a minute, I wondered if you'd learned how to fly!"

Subaru gave a weary chuckle. "Oh, I wish. If I could have flown over all that snow, my muscles wouldn't be so sore right

now!" Subaru thought for a moment and frowned. "Wait. Then how *did* you find me? The last thing I remember... Actually I'm not sure what the last thing I remember is. It kind of drifts into this weird dream where I find a riding dragon."

Emilia chuckled. "That wasn't a dream, Subaru."

"Huh?"

"First of all, Subaru, I didn't find you, you found *me*! You came riding up to me and Anri on a black riding dragon! I couldn't believe it! Where did you find a dragon in the forest?!"

Subaru stared at her in disbelief. "Wait a second, who's Anri?"

"Oh, right. She's a girl that I rescued from some mabeasts while I was looking for you," Emilia said calmly.

"*Mabeasts?!* " Subaru shouted.

"It's fine, Subaru," Emilia soothed. "These were some of the same mabeasts that you dealt with yesterday. You told them not to hurt me and they obeyed. They let me just walk away with Anri."

Subaru just stared at her for a long moment and then closed his eyes with a sigh. "Mili, please try to be a little more careful," He moaned.

Emilia snorted. "You should talk! Just mounting a riding dragon that you bumped into in the forest? Subaru, I know that a riding dragon could be very useful but was that really wise? Earth dragons can be very aggressive with strangers."

"Yeah well, this dragon wasn't exactly a stranger," Subaru replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Emilia, that dragon was... is *my* riding dragon! The one that brought me and Beatrice to the Sanctuary!"

"What?! How is that even possible? What is she doing here?"

Subaru snorted. "How would I know?!"

"Subaru, how did she find us?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged helplessly. "Emilia, your guess is as good as mine!"

"How did she even escape the Sanctuary before it was destroyed?"

Subaru froze. "Wait a second. Garf told me that he thought he saw my dragon being ridden out of the Sanctuary after the barrier went down..."

"By whom?"

"I don't know. Garf claimed that the rider looked just like Ryuzu."

"I thought that Ryuzu was with you during the fight with Roy?"

"Yeah. Garf couldn't explain it either. He just said that he saw someone who looked like Ryuzu riding my dragon out of the Sanctuary."

Emilia shook her head looking pained. "Subaru, so much of what happened tonight does *not* make sense."

"I know," Subaru agreed. "But I think we'll have to figure it out tomorrow." He frowned. "Hey, Mili, I just remembered something. Does the forest get a lot of lightning storms?"

Emilia shook her head. "No. Never! I saw the lightning too but it wasn't normal lightning. It jumped up from the hills instead of falling from the sky."

Subaru made a face. "Mili, do you remember where you saw the lightning come from?"

"I think so. Why?"

"I think maybe we should check out that hill in the morning."

"I'm not so sure about that, Subaru," She said dubiously. "What if something dangerous is in the forest?"

"Exactly," Subaru replied. "If there's something dangerous around here, I'd like to know about it before it comes looking for *us*."

Emilia frowned. "I always thought that the Snow Blight was the most dangerous thing in the forest. I can't think of anything that could throw lightning around."

Subaru nodded. "Well, we should take the riding dragon and check the area out in the morning. Maybe we can learn something about all this."

"Maybe Anri would have an idea," Emilia suggested.

"What do you mean?"

Emilia shrugged. "She might have seen something while she was out in the forest."

Subaru frowned. "Mili, do you think she could have written the note?"

Emilia screwed her face up. "Maybe... but I really don't think so, Subaru. She was trapped in a tree by mabeasts and looked like she'd been up there for some time."

Subaru sighed. "I guess that answer would have been too easy."

"Subaru, what I don't understand is, why would someone leave you a note in the first place? Why did someone want to lure you out of the cottage so badly?"

Subaru shook his head. "I don't know. I can't figure it out. What was the point of luring me out of the cottage? If they wanted to kill me, they couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. And if they wanted to talk to me, they could have just shaken me awake. I'm not all *that* heavy a sleeper. None of this makes sense."

The pair both stared at one another with worried expressions.

"Mili, why was Anri in the forest anyway?" Subaru asked finally.

Emilia paused. "Um. I'm not sure, Subaru. She didn't say."

Subaru nodded with a sigh. "Well, I guess that's another question we'll need to ask in the morning. Where is she right now?"

"I left her in Arche's house," Emilia replied.

Subaru smiled at her sadly. "I guess there were a lot of empty houses in the village to choose from."

Emilia bowed her head with a sigh. Then she shook off that pensive thought and took a deep breath. "Also, Subaru, Anri was asking if she thought we could bring her to town tomorrow."

"For what?"

"So that she can leave," Emilia shrugged. "It's actually not a bad idea. We need supplies anyway. I don't have very much food stored here."

Subaru made a face. "I guess that's the reality we need to deal with but I hate to risk exposing our location so soon." Subaru scratched his chin. "The Gusteko border runs through the forest, right?"

"I think so."

"Maybe we should do our shopping on the other side of the border. Just in case."

Emilia frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe," She muttered. "I don't know the towns past the northern edge of the forest very well. I almost never went up that way because of all the mabeasts. That's why I didn't recognize the part of the forest that we were wandering in. The Snow Blight in particular was very aggressive."

"Yeah, I think I saw that side of him," Subaru deadpanned.

Emilia laughed.

Subaru thought for a moment. "Mili, where did you leave the dragon?"

"There's an old stable in the village that's still sound. I left her in there. She seemed comfortable enough and I found some food in her saddlebags for her."

"Nice," Subaru approved.

"By the way, Subaru, what are you going to call the dragon?"

"Call her?" Subaru said in surprise. He thought about it. "Good point. She'll need a name, won't she? I guess I'll have to think about that."

Emilia sighed, rubbing her face.

Poor Mili. She looks absolutely exhausted. She not only walked as far as I have but she spent at least another full day taking care of me.

Subaru frowned. "I guess we need to make some plans before we do anything. We've been running off half-cocked ever since we left the Sanctuary. It really hasn't done us much good," He sighed.

Emilia sat down on the bed and stared into the fire, "But what *will* we do now? We've lost any chance of healing the forest, I'm an enemy of the kingdom, and we've even lost the spirits."

He took a deep breath. "We are going to get Puck and Beatrice back," Subaru said firmly.

"How?"

"I haven't thought ahead that far but I *am* going to get them back and I don't care what it takes!"

Emilia looked at him dubiously.

Subaru shook off his own malaise. He couldn't let the loss of Beatrice drag him down or he really would be unable to do anything, "Anyway, for us this worked out better than we ever could have hoped."

"What do you mean?"

"We've thrown off all our pursuit, both the Witch Cult and our friends and you know this area really well. You told me how nobody ever comes into the forest. This is a perfect place for us to get back on our feet and figure out how to break this curse."

"But the dragon blood is gone," Emilia murmured in despair, "There's no way to break the curse on the forest now."

Subaru winced, "I meant breaking the curse on you, Mili," He said gently, "Once we finish *that*, we can regroup and focus on saving the forest."

"Do you really think that we can?" Emilia asked in a faint voice.

"Of course, we can," Subaru assured her, "We will! You're not ready to give up now, are you?"

Emilia just stared at him with dead eyes.

Poor Mili, she's exhausted. So am I honestly. I know that I slept at some point today since I just woke up but I definitely don't feel like I did. I can't remember the last time I got a good night's sleep.

Mili must be even more worn out.

"You should try to get some sleep, Mili. You need a break."

Emilia gave a long, deep sigh and then forcibly put a bright smile on her face. "I'm fine, Subaru. You just rest here while I finish making dinner!"

Subaru lay in the bed, watching Emilia work in the kitchen. "Are you *sure* I can't help you?" He asked plaintively. "Have you been talking to Beako? I'm really not all *that* bad a cook!"

"Subaru! Sit!" Emilia directed while she fussed with the pot over the fire. "The stew is almost ready."

Subaru tried to suppress his laughter. Emilia had been absolutely resolute that *she* would make dinner for him tonight.

However, food preparation does not seem to be one of Emilia's talents. That pot has already boiled over twice. Emilia seems to be less 'cooking' the stew than trying to wrestle it into submission.

"Is this a favorite of yours?" Subaru asked.

"Mother Fortuna used to make this stew all the time and I want you to try it. She made it from whatever vegetables and meat she had lying around that needed to be used before they went bad. She said that the challenge of trying to use a random assortment of ingredients to produce something tasty was what made cooking this stew fun. She was a wonderful cook but this is my first time trying to do it."

"Sounds delicious!" Subaru said, trying to keep the trepidation out of his voice. The stew had apparently congealed to the point where Emilia was having to chop portions out of the pot with her serving spoon.

"I'm sorry that it's so cold in here now," Emilia apologized, "But I really needed to open that window to let out all the smoke from the stew."

"Oh. No worries, Mili. It's still warmer than it was outside."

Subaru suddenly choked and burst into a huge coughing fit. He hacked and coughed until his face was nearly blue and all he could do was lay back on the bed panting for breath.

"Subaru! Are you alright?!" Emilia asked, rushing to his side.

Subaru coughed up another sticky, tar-like glob that tasted like old rubber and laboriously swallowed it so that Emilia wouldn't see.

"Oh, I'm fine, Mili!" He said in a hoarse voice. "Just got a little cold!"

Emilia looked skeptical but the pot began to boil over again and Emilia raced back to attend to the stew.

As Subaru sat there catching his breath, a few crystals gleaming wetly on the table caught Subaru's eye. "Hey, Emilia, what are these?"

Emilia looked up from where she was fussing with dinner. "Oh, those are pyroxene crystals. I'd dug them up just before I left the forest with Roswaal so I never had a chance to sell them. They sold pretty well in Rixum back when Puck and I lived here. I stumbled over those crystals while I was pulling things out for dinner so I washed them off. Maybe we can sell them and make a little extra money."

Subaru frowned thoughtfully at the crystals. "Aren't these the same kind of crystals that we used in my engine?"

"Well," Emilia said slowly. "They're not *quite* the same but they're pretty similar."

Subaru stretched his arm toward the table and managed to grab one of the crystals. He almost fell out of bed and needed to grab the headboard to stabilize himself. He looked guiltily at Emilia but she hadn't noticed.

Subaru studied the stone. It was much smaller than the crystal they'd used for the engine and it reminded Subaru more of quartz than a gem.

"Emilia," Subaru mused. "Do you know how to charge one of these crystals?"

"I do. But why do you need a crystal charged?" Emilia asked, as she struggled to scoop servings out of the pot and into smaller bowls.

"I'm just thinking about an idea," Subaru replied thoughtfully. "So how do you charge it?"

"Well, you just sort of... do it," Emilia shrugged.

Subaru sighed. "Mili, you remember that I'm new to this planet, right? I need a *little* more detail than that."

I wonder if someday Emilia, Beatrice, and Puck will tell me that they all agreed to explain things to me in riddles just because they love watching me struggle.

"Well," Emilia said thoughtfully. "I guess you hold it in your hand and then you imagine your own energy flowing into the crystal."

OK. Sounds simple enough. If my mana comes from the Authority then maybe this is another way to practice working with the Authority? I mean, it might not help but I don't see how it could hurt, right? Besides, it would be nice to be able to charge these things myself without bugging Emilia or the spirits next time I'm working on something.

Subaru closed his eyes and clenched his fist around the crystal. He imagined energy flowing into it. His mind produced an image of purple streams of lights flowing from his heart, down his arm, and into the tiny crystal.

The sound of Emilia's stirring stopped.

"Subaru," Emilia said in a worried tone. "What are you doing?"

Subaru opened his eyes and saw Emilia staring at him, concern writ large on her face. "I just thought I'd try charging a crystal, like you said," He shrugged.

Emilia bit her lip, looking at the stone in Subaru's hand.

"Emilia, what is it?"

Emilia shook her head. "Can't you feel it?"

Subaru blinked. "Um. Feel what?"

"That stone is *wrong*."

"Huh?"

Emilia picked up another crystal. She wrapped her hands around it and closed her eyes for a few moments. Then she handed the crystal to Subaru.

Subaru held a stone in each hand. Now that he had something to compare it to, he immediately understood what Emilia was talking about.

This is strange. I've never been able to feel mana before. Now I'm suddenly wondering how I ever could have missed it. That by itself is pretty cool but now I also understand what was bothering Emilia.

Emilia's crystal reminds me of a placid river. The water is flowing along its natural course. There's a sense of stability and peace, of the magic in the crystal doing what it's meant to do.

My crystal feels different. Like a boiling kettle with the top bolted on. I mean... I've never held dynamite or nitroglycerin but somehow it reminds me of them. It doesn't even seem related to the amount of energy I added, it feels like the crystal isn't designed to hold my 'kind' of magic and it can barely contain it. Emilia's crystal is cradling the magic in the same way as the land embraces a river. My crystal feels more like someone took a flame and tried to hide it inside an envelope. Or like someone decided to store a few tons of baking soda at the bottom of a swimming pool.

"Well, I don't know what that means," Subaru murmured. "Do you think that I charged it wrong?" Subaru asked, holding out his stone to Emilia.

She made no move to touch it. "I don't even know what it would *mean* to charge a stone wrong," Emilia admitted. "Well, I suppose I do now. You just demonstrated."

"Harsh," Subaru complained, scratching his chin. He thought for a moment. "Didn't Beako once tell me that my mana was the opposite of normal mana?"

Subaru closed his eyes, deep in thought. *If my mana is unnatural, I wonder how the spirits are able to feed off of it...*

"I remember her saying that but I don't know what it means," Emilia replied, startling Subaru out of his musings. "For a moment, Subaru, you were suffused with mana and that mana was... very scary. *You* were very scary."

"What do you mean?"

"...You felt like a mabeast."

Subaru blinked. "What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?!"

Emilia looked frustrated as she struggled to find the right words. "It was like... some sixth sense or instinct starting screaming at me. I just suddenly knew that right behind me was something very dangerous. Something that could easily kill me."

Subaru's jaw dropped.

Emilia looked down at him pensively. "Subaru. I want you to stop using your Authority so much. The spirits were worried about it damaging you and now I can see why. The mana that it fills you with is unnatural and the Authority seems to be giving you more and more mana all the time."

Subaru wasn't sure what to say.

Emilia shook her head. "Just rest, Subaru. Dinner is almost ready."

Subaru watched Emilia struggle to put the 'stew' into a bowl and fought hard to keep a neutral expression on his face.

"So what is this called?" He asked as Emilia brought two bowls of 'stew' that looked more like an overcooked casserole to Subaru and sat down on the bed beside him.

Emilia chuckled. "Mother Fortuna called it 'My Emilia's Stew.'"

"Oh! Then I know I'll love it. Mother Fortuna and I must have had a lot in common."

Emilia giggled then shook off her amusement. "Subaru, eat!" She directed, poking him in the side. "You've haven't eaten anything in two days!"

"Yes, Mili," Subaru murmured, trying to chop a mouthful of 'stew' out of the bowl.

Subaru held it out in his spoon and inspected it. He couldn't for the life of him figure out what he was about to eat but he opened wide and put it in his mouth.

Yup, this tastes awful!

"This is great, Emilia," Subaru praised her.

"Subaru, you shouldn't tell fibs," She said primly, making a face at the taste of her own stew.

"It's not a fib!" He protested, "You made it for me with love and it's your love that I'm tasting!" He forced himself to keep eating.

Emilia took another bite and visibly shuddered, "I really thought that my 'love' would taste better than this!"

"Don't worry, my cooking won't taste any better," Subaru laughed. "We're both terrible homemakers but we can still still make a home for ourselves. We'll do it together."

Emilia looked at him and her eyes were somewhat watery.

"Nothing in our lives will ever be easy, Emilia," Subaru said, continuing to choke down his stew, "But as long as we're together, we can make it work."

Emilia took another bite and shook her head, "I always knew that our lives together would be difficult but I never realized that dinner would be so challenging."

Subaru actually laughed as he finished his bowl.

The room swam around him but he managed to keep it down.

"That was delicious, Emilia. Thank you for making it for me." Subaru took a deep breath and summoned up all of his courage. "Is there any more?"

"Subaru," Emilia said in a skeptical voice, her face slightly green.

Subaru took her hand. "You did something *for* me. I'm always grateful for that."

Emilia gave him a sad smile as she brought the empty bowls over to the sink.

Subaru yawned. "I know that it's still not that late but it's been a pretty hectic couple of days. What do you say about turning in early tonight?"

Emilia nodded. "I think... maybe that's a good idea." She said as she quickly rinsed out the bowls and the pot. "I have something to do before bed, though. Stay here and try to get some sleep," Emilia said, drying the dishes.

"Wait, what are you going to do?" Subaru asked, frowning.

"We're almost out of firewood, Subaru," Emilia said, pulling on her hooded robe over her dress and heading toward the door. "We only have enough wood to burn for a few days. I'm going out to find some more. I'll be back in an hour or two."

"In this storm?!" Subaru demanded.

"I grew up here, Subaru. I'll be fine."

"Mili, even if you do find any wood out there, buried in the snow, it's going to be too wet to burn!" Subaru pointed out.

Emilia opened the door. "I need to find firewood anyway. We need to start drying it out."

"The wood will take months to dry! We can go hunting for it tomorrow and accomplish just as much. Don't go hunting for firewood in the storm, Mili! There's no point!"

"Subaru, we need to keep you warm," Emilia protested.

"We're both exhausted, Mili. Just let the fire die and we'll cuddle up in bed together and we can keep each other warm."

Emilia thought about it for a moment then nodded and shut the door.

Emilia waved her hand over the fire and the flames flickered and dimmed to cinders. The room was dark except for the faint moonlight streaming through the windows.

Emilia started taking her clothes off.

Subaru moved over in the small bed to make room for her.

Emilia climbed into bed beside him. "Sorry that the bed is so small," Emilia murmured.

"It's fine," Subaru said, wrapping his arms around her and pressing his face into her soft hair. "If nothing else, it will help us to stay warm tonight."

Emilia made a small sound of contentment. "Subaru, how many days has it been since we last slept in a bed?"

"At least a week," Subaru replied. "Honestly, I sort of lost track. Come to think of it, this is the first night that we've been alone together since... well, you know," Subaru blushed.

"Hm," Emilia smiled, snuggling up against him. "I must admit, it's very nice having just the two of us alone in the bed."

"Yeah," Subaru agreed, "I almost feel disloyal saying that, since I know that Beako and Puck are all alone right now, even knowing that Felt is watching them. But it's nice to have a little time for ourselves. We might as well enjoy it, once we get the spirits back and go looking for the cure to your curse, we probably won't have much more time alone for a while."

Emilia stiffened.

"Mili?" He murmured. "Are you OK?"

She took a deep breath but didn't look at him. "Subaru. I... I need to say something but... I'm afraid to. I'm afraid that... you're going to be disappointed in me. You might even be angry."

Subaru nodded and held her closer. "OK, well why don't you tell me what's on your mind and I'll do my very best not to get angry."

Emilia took a deep breath and let it out as she slowly rolled over to face him. "Subaru. I've been thinking. We don't know any way of ending the curse on the forest or ending the curse on me personally. We don't even know if either is possible."

She paused, looking at him expectantly.

Subaru nodded slowly. "We don't know for sure but I have strong reason to *think* that it's possible."

"But we don't know any way to actually do it or even any way to find out how to do it," Emilia said quietly.

Subaru nodded. "I guess that's true. What are you suggesting?"

"Subaru," Emilia closed her eyes, "I *never* wanted to be King. I would never have been happy in that life. The only reason I ever left the forest in the first place was because Roswaal found me and convinced me that the dragon blood could save the elves. The outside world has done nothing but hurt me. They see my hair and my ears and they call me a witch. This time all of our friends have abandoned us. The outside world has even taken Daddy away! The outside world would even take *you* away if it could. Why would I *ever* want to leave the forest again?"

Her tone was harsh and bitter, the sound of someone whose heart has been deeply wounded and who wishes to injure

her listeners in turn.

Subaru held her close. He felt all the hurt in her words and was quiet for a long moment, giving *her* a chance to feel it, to let the venom start to work its way out of her wounded heart.

"Well, maybe we should consider another plan," Subaru whispered, stroking her cheek, "Do you have any ideas?"

Emilia looked up at Subaru with wide eyes. She looked so young, so vulnerable, "Subaru, why don't we just stay here?"

"What do you think we would do?" Subaru asked calmly.

"We could have a life together," Emilia said earnestly, "Just a life! That's all that I want, Subaru. This cottage isn't like Roswaal's mansion but... it could easily be home. We could make it home. There's food in the forest and things that we could trade with the merchants in the neighboring villages. Trading with humans would be even easier than it was before because you could go into town safely as long as I never went with you. No one ever comes into the forest. We'd be safe here. After a while, both the Sin Archbishops and the kingdom would get tired of looking for us and we'd be free. There's a town not far away where you could find a job if you don't want to work in the forest and I could go back to digging crystals out of the ground to trade. We could fix up the cottage and make it snug and warm. A perfect haven just for the two of us; a paradise," Emilia whispered.

Subaru rubbed Emilia's back, wordlessly urging her to continue.

Emilia closed her eyes and laid her head against Subaru's chest. "Subaru, I want to have a family. I want to have a little one of my own to cherish forever. We'd have to wait a while before we were sure it was safe but we could start our family together. We could share a child, born from our love. I can just imagine them running around the forest. I know that I can't heal the forest anymore but... it could still be home. I did the best I could to save the elves and it just wasn't enough. I don't have to feel guilty anymore."

Emilia took a ragged breath and the painful, despairing words just poured out of her, "Subaru, we can start over, just the two of us. We can have a quiet life where our only goal is to be happy. Don't we deserve that? Why were we the ones chosen to fix all the world's problems? This world is too big for us to move. It won't change just because we say so. But we could make this cottage anything we wanted it to be. It could be our own little world. Just us and our family. Isn't that enough?" Emilia almost begged.

Subaru stroked Emilia's cheek gently, "*You* are enough for me. Always have been. The only reason I even tried to win the throne was to help you. If this is what you want then I'm all for it. We can stay right here. We never have to leave. We'll make do. As long as we're together."

"Subaru... do you really mean that?" Emilia asked with watery eyes.

"Of course I do," Subaru replied calmly. "*You* are what matters to me. You are all that I need. I just want you to tell me what you want and I will *make* it happen."

"I just want to stay here, Subaru," Emilia blubbered, tears falling down her cheeks, "The world has taken so much from us already. You're all that I have left and I couldn't bear to lose you too! Let's just hold onto what we have. It's my dream to stay here forever with you!"

Subaru nodded, drawing her head to his shoulder and stroking her hair. "Then that's what we'll do. I am one hundred percent on board with this. With one correction."

"What's that?" She whispered.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Emilia... I won't abandon Beatrice. I can't. I made her a promise and I mean to keep it. I think that us vanishing into the woods forever is a fine strategy but... it's going to be after I've rescued Beatrice and Puck. Then we can disappear and the world can forget about us."

Emilia was silent and pulled away from Subaru.

"Mili?"

"Subaru," She whispered. "Are you... sure that we should even try to get the spirits back?"

Subaru frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Being with me... I'd only put them in danger," She murmured, looking away from him with tears in her eyes. "They could even get hurt if someone came looking to kill me because they thought that I was a witch."

Subaru blinked. "But Emilia, don't you miss Puck?"

Emilia's face twisted in despair. "No, Subaru! I miss *my* Daddy! Puck is your Daddy now! He hates me! He disowned me! He threatened to kill me! Why would I ever want him back?!"

Emilia buried her face in the pillow, crying great wrenching sobs.

Subaru quickly began to rub her back.

"I'm such a bad person!" She blubbered. "I'm so ashamed! I don't even want to rescue my own father!"

"You're not a bad person," Subaru soothed. "You're a person who's in an awful lot of pain. Puck treated you horribly. Of

course you're angry with him. Who wouldn't be?"

"But it isn't his fault," Emilia whimpered into the pillow.

"Yeah it is!" Subaru disagreed. "He couldn't stop himself from losing his memories but he *absolutely* could have decided to treat you fairly! Unfortunately 'fair' is not a word in Puck's vocabulary."

Emilia rolled over to look up at Subaru, wiping her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Subaru considered his answer for a moment. "Mili, I've been on both sides of the fence with Puck. I've had him despise me, I've had him tolerate me, and I've had him adore me. The first thing I can tell you is that Puck is *fundamentally* unfair. As far as he's concerned, the people he loves can do no wrong and the rest of the people in the world are either annoying irritants or things that should be destroyed. He doesn't apply even *close* to the same standard to the people he cares about compared to the people he doesn't. You told me that he blamed you for putting me and Beatrice in danger, right?"

Emilia nodded.

"Well, how come he never said a word to me about dragging us all over northern Lagunica with an army chasing us? I didn't have a single plan for where we were going or what we were doing that actually worked out! I almost got us killed by a stormcrow! I turned us into bait for Capella! He never made a peep! Why? Because that's how Puck rolls. He blames everything that goes wrong on the people that he *doesn't* like and the people that he loves get all the credit!"

Emilia frowned. "Subaru, I think that you're exaggerating."

"I'm not! Believe me, I'm not! Do you have any idea how many times Puck threatened to kill me when we first met? It was a lot! And it is ten times worse for you because you love him. I didn't give a shit about him back then so I didn't care if he threatened me."

Subaru sighed and wrapped his arms around Emilia. She laid her head against his chest. "Mili, tell me the truth. Even if we stayed here and everything worked out and we had a family... wouldn't you always feel like there's a hole in your heart where Puck should be?"

Emilia hesitated then nodded sadly.

Subaru laid his cheek against her hair. "We're going to get them both back. And then we're going to disappear into the forest. Puck won't have any issues with you as long as we're all safe. If we can't fix Puck's memories then... he'll still learn to love you again. He'll love you for my sake. The same way he learned to love me because you loved me. It's the long way around but I promise you that we're going to be a real family again."

Subaru paused. "Besides," He chuckled, "Getting the spirits back means that we'll always have two babysitters hanging around to look after our little Emilia!"

"Elaine," Emilia whispered.

"What?"

"If we ever have a daughter, Subaru, her name is going to be *Elaine*," Emilia said firmly.

"Um. OK, I guess. Is that like the name of an old friend of yours or something?" Subaru said, looking puzzled. "What if we have a boy?"

"Perseus," She answered with a smile.

"*What?!* Emilia, where did you even *hear* that name?"

Emilia giggled. "I'll tell you someday."

Subaru looked annoyed. "Seriously?" Subaru grumbled. "You're really not going to tell me?"

Emilia giggled. Then she grew serious again. "Subaru! It's time to get some sleep! You need to rest!"

Subaru nodded with a yawn. "Oh yeah, I'm ready to sleep. Every muscle in my body is screaming like an abscessed tooth. But I have sorely missed my 'Emilia snuggles' over the past few weeks."

Subaru wrapped himself around Emilia and pressed his face into her hair. "Home," He whispered.

"What?" She asked.

"I just... I just like the word," Subaru admitted. "After we find the spirits, this could be our place, our own little shelter against the world."

"It's such a beautiful thought," Emilia agreed.

"It is. Although truthfully, I think maybe we should search the village for someplace bigger."

"What do you mean?"

Subaru chuckled. "Emilia, you have a great little cottage here but it's barely large enough for two people. Now pack two

spirits into it *and* maybe a baby? We'll all be on top of each other. We need to find a bigger place. It shouldn't be too hard. I saw lots of larger houses in the village."

Emilia was silent.

"Mili? Did I say something wrong?"

"No. It's nothing that you said," Emilia said quietly. "I know that you're right it's just... I deliberately picked a house that was empty at the time of the... incident. Moving into someone's house just seemed... disrespectful. It felt like... giving up on breaking the curse. It meant acting like they were never coming back."

Subaru nodded. "I guess I can see that. And I promise you, I haven't given up on breaking the curse. I promised you we'd do it and I mean to keep my promise. Maybe we can find another house that's empty."

Emilia was silent for a long time.

"Mili? Something bothering you?"

She took a deep breath. "There's always Mother Fortuna's house."

Subaru blinked. "Wait. Isn't this Fortuna's house? I thought you said that it was yours."

"It is mine, Subaru. But Mother Fortuna never lived here."

"So this was just an empty cottage you moved into after the accident? After Puck thawed you out, why not just move back into your room at Fortuna's?"

"Oh no, I never actually had a room with Mother Fortuna. I lived somewhere else when I was younger. I lived in a little building in the village that they called the 'Princess Tower.' I spent most of my time in Mother Fortuna's house but I didn't live with her."

Subaru frowned. "I'm still a little surprised that you didn't move into her house after the accident then. Wouldn't that have been the most natural thing for you to do?"

Emilia hesitated. "Well, Puck and I didn't need much space so picking someplace smaller just made more sense. Besides..." She trailed off.

Subaru waited. "Besides?" He prompted.

Emilia sighed. "It's just... like I said, I thought that it would be disrespectful to move into someone else's home. After all, I was trying to lift the curse and bring them all back. Moving into one of their houses would have meant admitting that they were gone and that they really weren't coming back."

"But, Mili, Fortuna was..." He hesitated.

"Dead? I know that, Subaru," Emilia whispered. "I mean... I guess I knew that..." She took a deep breath. "No, that's a lie. Deep down, I always had this dream that when I reversed the curse, Mama Fortuna and Guese would come back too. I know that it's silly but..." She trailed off.

Subaru gently kissed her cheek. "You loved them very much."

Emilia nodded.

"Of course you miss them. Of course you dream of having them back. There's no shame in that, Emilia. And we don't need to use Fortuna's house. We can build our own if you'd rather. We have all the time in the world."

Emilia made a noncommittal sound.

"But personally, I think maybe we should consider taking a look at Fortuna's house. I never had the chance to meet the woman but I know from what you've told me that she loved you very much."

Emilia didn't answer.

"I'm just thinking out loud here but if it was our daughter, I think... I think I'd like knowing that the same place I loved my family was where she was loving her own. It's like... passing the torch to the next generation."

Emilia sniffled. "Subaru, stop it! You're going to make me cry again!"

Subaru half chuckled. "Well, whatever we decide to do, we're not going to be ready to do anything involving leaving the forest for at least a few days so you'll have some more time to rest and recover."

Emilia sighed, "I need that, Subaru. I want to be strong but-"

"You've been nothing *but* strong through this entire mess, Mili," Subaru soothed. "Nobody could have endured this hell any better than you did. We made some mistakes along the way but that doesn't mean that we're weak or careless. We're both exhausted. We will save the spirits but it's not going to be tonight or tomorrow. We need to recover our strength and come up with a plan."

Emilia was quiet. "Yes. Everything will look better in the morning, won't it?"

"We have a ton of problems, Emilia. But you and me have had a hell of a lucky streak for dealing with them. As long as we're together, we can do anything."

Emilia took a deep breath and snuggled closer to Subaru. "As long as we're together."

"Greetings, gentlemen," Montefort said, sitting in an easy chair as Willard Pickett and Lord Zyst entered the room that evening.

They were meeting in Montefort's palatial estate just outside of town. It was a cozy little room with only three very comfortable chairs and a small table in it.

"Good evening, young Lord-" Willard caught himself. "Forgive me, *Lord* Montefort. Some days I forget that your grandfather has departed us."

"Gone but not forgotten, Master Pickett. Grandfather spoke highly of you as well," Montefort said wistfully, glancing up at a large portrait hanging on the wall of an elderly, stern-faced man.

Willard struggled to wedge his enormous bulk into a large easy chair.

Without a word, three young maids brought the men's drinks to them. These men were regular guests in this household and no one needed to ask what they wished to be served.

Zyst took his seat as well, accepting a drink from the maid. "I always meant to ask you, why did you bring your grandfather's portrait into the meeting room?"

"I find it soothing. I enjoy the thought that my grandfather watches over me as I continue his valiant quest to bring security to the kingdom," Montefort answered with a smile. He coughed. "Now gentlemen, if you'll forgive me for asking, what is the emergency? It's been years since either of you have asked for an additional monthly meeting and I am really quite curious."

Zyst opened his mouth to speak but Willard cut him off with a snort. "Anastasia has informed me of some very dire news. This is why I asked for this meeting."

"Wait," Zyst said, looking at Willard in confusion. "*I* asked for this meeting!"

"You both asked for this meeting," Montefort said with a calm smile. "That was what so convinced me that something dire must be afoot. Perhaps simply to speed things along, Master Pickett might go first."

Another young maid entered the room carrying a tray of pastries. Her eyes darted around the room looking intimidated by the opulent decor as she set her tray down on a small table between the three men.

Willard sighed. "I have supported Anastasia's claims to the throne and have been firmly of the opinion that she has the clear head to revitalize our economy and improve our fortunes. However, now I-" Willard trailed off as he glanced down at the tray of pastries set in front of him. Willard fixed a murderous eye on the maid. "What is this?" He hissed.

The young maid flinched back, uncertain of what she had done wrong. Montefort and Zyst also glanced at the tray. They shared a look of tired resignation.

"Is this chocolate?!" Willard demanded.

The young maid swallowed hard. "Yes, sir!" She said in a trembling voice. "Because your eminences' visit was so unexpected, we baked a new batch of pastries for you just this evening and-"

"I will not tolerate the presence of chocolate! Get it out of my sight!" Willard roared.

The young maid cowered before the enraged merchant, tears streaming down her face.

"Yes," Montefort said calmly, getting up from his chair, "I think perhaps it would be best to forgo treats for the time being. If you gentlemen will excuse me for a moment?"

Montefort calmly led the crying maid out of the room, the tray in her arms. He quietly closed the door behind him.

The maid was trembling. "Forgive me, Lord Montefort! I didn't mean-"

"Olivia," Montefort said kindly, "Master Pickett has a- how shall we say, rather unusual objection to chocolate," Montefort informed her. "Please offer him what patience that you may, as this is connected with the loss of his precious little sister as a boy. He is well aware that this is irrational behavior on his part but it remains beyond his ability to control. Rest assured that I am in no way angry with you for this. In truth, I feel somewhat responsible for permitting you to be placed in such an unpleasant situation at all. Please accept my humble apologies. There is no way that you could have known about Master Pickett's predilections and the fault is mine for failing to ensure that you were properly informed. You did well to prepare those delectable treats so promptly for our unexpected guests. If Master Pickett doesn't want any, all the more for me. I look forward to indulging in them for desert tonight. Please return to your normal duties, Olivia," Montefort said calmly.

Olivia had stopped crying and looked at her master with blind gratitude. "Thank you, my lord," Olivia said, dipping into a small curtsy and walking away with her tray.

Montefort walked back into the small room. Neither man was talking in his absence.

Montefort sat back down and steepled his fingers. "I apologized on your behalf, Master Pickett," He said in a calm voice. "However, I'm quite certain that you will wish to make your own apologies before departing. Isn't that so?"

Willard murmured something indistinct while looking down at the floor.

"Splendid," Montefort said. "Now, Master Pickett, what were you saying before we were interrupted?"

Willard sighed. "Anastasia seems to have succumbed to sentimental thinking. She has been seduced by Subaru Natsuki's promises to empty the slums."

"Seduced in what way?" Montefort asked.

"She plans to concede the election!"

Zyst looked sharply at Willard.

Willard shook his head. "Apparently, Subaru Natsuki has made her a very generous offer for her support. *So* generous in fact that I can't even fault her for accepting it! However, the boy's politics are unacceptable to say the least."

"It's interesting," Montefort mused. "When the boy first came onto the scene, we barely paid him any attention. Now that he's slain the Whale and two Archbishops he's become impossible to ignore. Perhaps we should have had someone trustworthy try to claim his ear sooner." Montefort paused. "What was the offer, if you don't mind my asking?"

Willard sighed. "The original offer was for a seat on the royal assembly and exclusive distribution rights to all of his machines."

Zyst broke in. "His machines are why-"

"Please, Lord Zyst," Montefort raised a finger. "Let Master Pickett finish. That way we can all devote our full attention to your concerns in turn."

Zyst sighed and nodded.

Willard continued, "She plans to negotiate into obtaining the chancellorship before accepting. However, Subaru Natsuki plans to empty the slums!"

"So I have heard," Montefort mused. "I assume that this is unacceptable to you?"

"Can you imagine how high the cost of labor will soar if all of those dust rats are sent out into the country? My constituents in the merchant guilds are going to be crushed!"

"I never imagined that Lady Anastasia would concede the race so soon," Montefort said.

"It is hard to blame her," Zyst admitted. "I dare say that the race is over for all intents and purposes. She wishes to sell out while her support still has value."

"Forgive me, Lord Zyst," Montefort said. "You have been very patient. What matter brings you here today?"

Zyst took a deep breath. "Priscilla Barielle is also prepared to concede the election."

Willard gaped at Zyst.

"Truly?" Montefort raised an eyebrow.

Zyst nodded. "She doesn't believe that there's any way for her to catch up. She plans to offer Subaru Natsuki her hand in marriage. She claims that Subaru Natsuki has created a new kind of machine that could change the entire world."

"I have heard similar claims," Willard broke in. "Anastasia is fascinated by these machines. I am equally impressed by their potential. I think that I could easily make an arrangement with Subaru Natsuki on the basis of these machines if he would just abandon these foolish aspirations of eliminating our low cost labor force."

"His machines are the entire problem!" Zyst grated. "I am heartily indifferent to whichever fool Priscilla Barielle manages to foist herself off on. However, the intelligence I've managed to obtain regarding these machines is extremely concerning to my mages."

"How so?" Montefort asked.

"His machines run off cheap mana crystals. These crystals can be charged by nearly anyone with magical talent, even if it would take a good deal longer to charge one for a weak hedge wizard compared to a trained Circle Mage. Subaru Natsuki's machines appear poised to replace a wide variety of tasks that are currently done by enchantments. My colleagues at the Mages' Circle have spent a great deal of time thinking about the possible applications of this 'engine' and we are in agreement that the sky is the limit."

"Reducing the importance of the Mages' Circle considerably," Montefort commiserated.

Zyst nodded. "I am indifferent to Subaru Natsuki becoming king or not. His politics affect me in no way but we must ensure that he makes no more of these damnable machines! My people study for decades to achieve mastery of their art. I will not permit them to be replaced by ignorant hedge wizards who will charge a copper to enchant a magic crystal!"

"Has Lady Crusch spoken?" Willard asked Montefort.

"About leaving the election? Not a word. She appears to loathe Subaru Natsuki quite heartily. I can't imagine what it would take for her to willingly concede," Montefort replied.

Willard grunted. "As unacceptable as we all find the notion of Subaru Natsuki on the throne," Willard mused, "And as grateful as I am that someone is refusing to end the election prematurely, I am compelled to admit that this is a very poor decision on her part. She is letting her emotions guide her actions. In candor, it might behoove her to consider selling out while her assets are still worth something. As Lord Zyst said, it does appear that the election is over."

"Over for the moment at least," Montefort said thoughtfully. "Lady Crusch appears to be trying an... unconventional and rather risky strategy to reopen it."

"What's that?" Zyst said.

"After Subaru Natsuki went missing during the fall of the Sanctuary, Lady Crusch informed the sages' council that he is roaming around the wilds with a half-breed witch. Lady Crusch has gone so far as to claim that it is the revived Witch of Envy."

Willard stared at Montefort in total shock. "Madness!" He shook his head. "Or a desperate, childish slander campaign."

Montefort shrugged.

Willard turned to Zyst, "Is there any way that the witch *could* be free?"

Zyst didn't answer.

Montefort frowned. "Lord Zyst?"

Zyst shook his head. "We... have no evidence that the Witch is free and much evidence that she is not..." He trailed off.

"But?" Montefort prodded.

Zyst shook his head with a sigh. "Ever since the Sanctuary was breached something has... happened to the Witch's seal and to a variety of other seals that we monitor all throughout the world. It's almost as if the seals were all... tied together somehow and breaching one compromised them all."

"Is there any sign that the Witch's seal is weakening further?!" Willard demanded.

Zyst shook his head. "It does not... appear to be..."

"Reassuring," Montefort commented. "However, to get back on topic, I myself do not believe Crusch's actions to be a slander campaign. That would require political guile that Lady Crusch lacks. She believes with all her heart that she is speaking the truth."

"Then she is mad," Willard replied.

Montefort shrugged. "We all seem to be rather disappointed with our candidates as of late."

The other two nodded sagely.

Zyst had a grim expression on his face. "I can't believe that I'm saying this," Zyst murmured, "But perhaps Priscilla Barielle's words contained wisdom for once. If Subaru Natsuki's coronation is truly inevitable, then I suppose we should consider aligning ourselves with the new regime."

"Have you completely taken leave of your senses?" Willard demanded.

Zyst shrugged. "Come now, Willard. One puppet dances as well as any other. We offer Subaru Natsuki the throne in exchange for a series of restrictions on his policies."

"Oh my, what a brilliant negotiator you must believe yourself to be," Willard said sarcastically. "You seriously intend to approach Subaru Natsuki and say: 'Because you becoming King has become inevitable, we are willing to permit you to have that prize, which we have no way to deny you in any case. In exchange, we demand that you agree to the following series of concessions, although we have no way to enforce said concessions and we have nothing to offer you in return.' Is that about right?"

"Subaru Natsuki is becoming too powerful," Montefort cut in before Zyst could respond. "Worse, he's becoming politically dangerous. He's tapping into forces in the kingdom that we have long fought to suppress. His public support is growing by leaps and bounds. We may need to take action."

"I'm reluctant to lose access to the potential market for his machines," Willard admitted. "But I can live with that if it results in the resumption of the status quo."

"Are you suggesting an 'accident?'" Zyst asked Montefort.

Montefort thought about it. "At the moment all that I'm suggesting is a wait-and-see attitude. Crusch will never concede so the election will go the full two years. We have time to take action later if it proves necessary. If the other two candidates *do* concede then Crusch can be a reasonable compromise candidate should something happen to Subaru Natsuki."

"Is it wise to wait?" Willard asked. "Subaru Natsuki may well just keep on claiming more support."

"Our taking direct action should be a last resort," Montefort disagreed. "At least for the moment, I have a mind to let Crusch play her hand. At worst, she embarrasses herself. At best, she may provide an opening for herself. Or for us."

Subaru and Emilia woke up early the next morning. Emilia restarted the fire with a wave of her hand.

"Subaru, I think that you should go check on Anri," Emilia murmured as they dressed.

Subaru looked pained. "Um. Maybe you should do that, Mili. I don't think she would care to wake up and find a strange man staring at her while she sleeps."

Emilia sighed. "A strange man or a wicked witch. Which do you think she'd prefer?"

Subaru flinched. "I guess you have a point," He admitted. He scratched his chin for a moment and pulled a gold coin out of his satchel. "Flip you for it?" He offered.

Emilia looked at him, unamused. "Get going, Subaru." She handed him a few small logs from the wood pile. "Here. If she's not awake yet, build up the fire in her house. We need to keep her warm. I'm not certain if she can use mana to warm herself. I'll start making breakfast."

Subaru chuckled. "Yes, dear," He said as he left the house.

The forest and the village were quiet that morning. The storm had passed and the sun was shining but the forest was shrouded in mist thick enough to walk on.

It's freezing out here! How the hell do you get fog when it's this cold?! More unnatural weather caused by Emilia's curse?

Subaru looked around the village but visibly was reduced to maybe twenty feet so there wasn't much to see.

Subaru carried the logs across the 'street' to the other cottage. Subaru hesitated at the door and then knocked quietly.

He heard nothing so Subaru cracked the door and peeked in.

Anri was still asleep and the fire was dying down to embers. The girl was a loud snorer.

Subaru crept into the house and quietly added the logs to the dwindling fire. He tried to angle the logs to catch the remaining embers and saw the flames slowly creep along the dry bark of the new logs.

When he was satisfied that he had breathed new life into the fire, he walked over to the bed where the girl was sleeping.

There was no sign of any injury or illness other than the broken arm and Anri was sleeping peacefully.

Well, it looks like she's recovering from her night in the tree pretty well. Of course, that does beg the question of what do we do with her now...

Subaru turned to leave the house. "Ouch!" He swore as he tripped over something.

The girl's snoring changed note but after a moment she burrowed deeper into her blankets and kept on sleeping, her snoring muted.

Subaru looked down and discovered that he had tripped over a rapier in a beautiful, elaborate sheath that was lying on the floor.

Subaru picked it up and inspected it. He partially drew the blade.

Wow. I don't know much about swords but this blade is beautiful! The metalwork is covered in delicate engravings.

I'm guessing that this belongs to the girl. For some reason, I have a hard time picturing Emilia's people carrying weapons.

She must have dropped it.

Subaru made a face. *Maybe I should borrow this for a while... Just in case she gets any ideas...*

"Hey. Who are you?" A voice asked.

Subaru jumped and spun around.

The girl's eyes were open and she was staring at Subaru blearily.

Subaru flashed her a smile. "Hi. My name's Subaru. I understand that you made me some medicine last night."

Anri sat up in bed with a yawn, holding the blankets tight to her chest to preserve her modesty. "It was no big deal. You certainly seem to have made a fast recovery."

Subaru chuckled. "If you had any idea how much shit we've been through lately, you'd know why I need to be a quick

healer."

Anri smirked at him. "Yeah, Emilia told me that you guys have had it rough. I'm Anri."

"Nice to meet you. Emilia is making breakfast right now if you want some."

"Food sounds great. Hey, you mind turning around for a minute?"

"I don't mind," Subaru obediently turned around. "But wouldn't it be easier if I just left the cottage?"

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about something," Anri said as Subaru heard her getting dressed.

Subaru shrugged. "OK..."

"What do you think about going to one of the local villages today?"

"For what?"

"Well, food for starters. Emilia told me you don't have much food left and this forest can't be easy to forage in."

"I've got to admit, we didn't have much luck," Subaru replied ruefully, recalling their aimless wanderings through the woods.

"Also if we go to one of the local villages, I can get out of your hair. I can probably buy a ride from a traveling merchant and get where I need to get to."

"And where's that?" Subaru asked.

"You can turn around now, Subaru. Oh, I've been on the road for weeks trying to get home. I've had the worst luck along the way and been bounced from place to place but I'm finally almost there and all I need to do is finish the homestretch!"

Subaru turned around and saw Anri standing there dressed in her blue hooded riding cloak and brown pants. Her arm still hung in a sling. She flashed Subaru a broad grin as she finished lacing up her shirt.

Subaru cocked his head and his eyes narrowed slightly. "That was a stirring reply, Anri," Subaru complimented her in a neutral tone. "And while all answers are replies, not all replies are answers. You didn't answer my question. *Where* exactly are you trying to get to?"

Anri's smile tightened. "Say, Subaru, do you think that we know each other well enough for me to say 'my business is none of yours?' I mean, I think that we *both* have secrets we'd rather not share."

"Oh, hell yeah!" Subaru agreed calmly. "And honestly, I don't really care where you're going. But as far as 'your business not being my business', well that's only true for so long as it's true."

Anri frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Subaru looked at her intently. "It means that I don't *want* to have to care about your secrets, Anri," Subaru said in a grim voice. "They're just more mess for me to deal with when I'm already spread pretty goddamn thin. Your secrets *aren't* my business. But if they put me and Emilia in danger then they *become* my business pretty damn quick. You get me?"

Anri's eyes opened wide at Subaru's hard tone. Subaru was suddenly acting like a completely different person. There was a chill light in his eye that made her feel as if she was being analyzed as easily as she might study a ledger. "Yeah... I get you," The girl said, trying to sound flippant but not quite pulling it off.

"So tell me the truth, Anri," Subaru said firmly. "*Can* I ignore your problems or is there something that you should be warning me about right now?"

Anri swallowed hard. "I don't... *think* so..."

Subaru appraised her for a long moment. Then he made a face and sighed. "Alright. I guess I'll accept that for the time being."

Anri blinked in surprise. Subaru's tone had shifted back to the same calm, casual voice he'd had before.

Subaru waved his hand. "Look, I won't ask any questions about you if you promise that you won't *answer* any questions about us. I get the funny feeling that both of us are hiding from *something*. Otherwise, why would you come into the forest at all?"

Anri's lips thinned but she didn't answer immediately. "I suppose you might be onto something there," She conceded. "It would probably be for the best if I left as soon as possible and forgot that I ever met you. That way we won't... inconvenience each other."

Subaru nodded. "Makes sense to me."

Anri looked at Subaru's hand and he suddenly realized that he was still holding her rapier. "So, can I assume," She muttered, "That you'll be... holding onto that for me until we part ways?" She asked sarcastically.

Subaru thought for a moment then shrugged and held the rapier out to her.

Anri took the sword with her good hand, looking up at him in confusion.

"No," Subaru replied calmly. "I don't see any need to do that."

Anri stared at Subaru with a perplexed expression on her face.

"What is it?" Subaru asked.

"I don't know," Anri admitted. "This may sound funny but... I think maybe it would have worried me less if you'd insisted on keeping the sword. Giving it back... kind of suggests that you're completely unconcerned that I might try to use it."

Subaru gave Anri a slow smirk as he opened the cottage door. "So. Coming for breakfast?" He asked calmly.

Anri swallowed hard and nodded.

"One more thing," Subaru said as he stepped outside. "Cooking is still... more of an art than a science for Emilia. So, if you could try not to comment on breakfast, I'd really appreciate it."

Subaru and Anri entered the cottage. They found Emilia cooking soup.

Emilia looked up. "Good morning, Anri! Are you feeling any better?"

Anri gave Emilia a broad grin. "Well, my skin isn't blue anymore! So that's progress!"

Emilia laughed. "How's your arm feeling?"

"Not bad, really. I think that it's mending," Anri replied. "I'm mostly just feeling tired right now more than anything else. Which is weird because I literally just woke up."

"Mili, can I do anything to help you make breakfast?" Subaru asked.

"Oh, I'm fine, Subaru. It's nearly done. Why don't you and Anri just take a seat at the table."

The pair sat down across from one another at the table. Anri looked slightly uncomfortable to be sitting this close to him.

"Emilia," Anri said. "Where did you say was the nearest town?"

"Nearest?" Emilia murmured, fussing with the soup. "Hm. I think... that would be Rixum."

"Is it far?" Anri continued.

Emilia nodded. "It's a goodly distance from here, Anri. I used to walk there from time to time when I had things to trade. It's just beyond the southeastern edge of the forest. But are you sure you should be out of bed this soon?"

Anri shrugged. "I'm a little tired but hopefully I can just sleep on a merchant's wagon if I can buy passage from out of Rixum."

"Rixum is a pretty long walk," Emilia warned her. "Can you use mana to keep yourself warm in the forest?"

"What do you mean?" Anri asked in confusion. "I don't have much mana. I only ever mastered a few very basic healing spells."

Emilia gave Subaru a worried look.

Subaru shrugged. "That's OK, we'll all take Patrasche."

"Take what?" Anri asked.

"Patrasche. That's what I decided to call the dragon."

Emilia squinted at him. "Subaru, that's a really strange name. Where did you even hear that name?"

Subaru smirked at her. "I'll tell you. *Someday*."

Emilia glowered at him.

Subaru's smile was beatific.

"OK," Anri murmured. "I feel like I'm missing something here..."

"Private joke," Subaru shrugged.

Emilia sighed and shook her head. "Well, I suppose that we need to go to town today anyway. We're nearly out of food. We only have enough for one or two more meals."

Anri nodded. "Hey, great timing! You guys get to buy food and you get me out of your hair. It's a win-win!"

Subaru nodded. "Anri, do you think that you could be ready to go this afternoon?"

Anri blinked. "Um. Actually, I'm ready now. Why the delay?"

Subaru shrugged. "I just have a few chores around here that I want to take care of before we head out," He said innocently. "Besides, you already said how tired you were. A few more hours of sleep might do you good."

Emilia squinted at him from behind Anri's back.

Breakfast was a thin broth with a few vegetables in it. After they'd finished, Anri returned to the other cottage to take a nap and Subaru helped Emilia tidy up.

"Subaru, what did you mean about doing chores?" Emilia asked as she scrubbed the pot.

"I just wanted to take a look at a few things before we send Anri on her way and put her out of our minds," Subaru replied, drying the bowls.

Emilia stopped cleaning. "I know that look on your face, Subaru," She said in a worried voice. "Do you think Anri is an enemy?"

Subaru hesitated. "No," He said slowly. "Or at least... I don't want to. I just think that there's a lot of weird stuff going on around here lately and I'd like to poke around a little before we leave."

"What did you want to look at?"

"Do you think you could find that place you told me about? The place the lightning was shooting from last night?" Subaru asked.

Emilia frowned thoughtfully. "I can," She said finally. "But it's a long ways off, Subaru. I don't like the idea of you walking that far away from the village. You could get caught in a sudden storm again and you don't move very fast."

"Patrasche does," Subaru said cheerfully. "If we run into stormy weather, she'll be able to get us back here quick."

Emilia mulled that over. "I suppose that makes sense," She admitted. "But are you sure that we should even go to this place? It might be dangerous."

"Exactly. That's why we need to try to figure out what was going on there. If there *is* something dangerous in the forest then we need to know about it."

Emilia resumed scrubbing the pot. "And you think that Anri might have had something to do with it?"

"I don't know," Subaru said honestly.

"She seems very nice, Subaru," Emilia said in a neutral voice.

"Yeah. She does," He agreed.

"She even made you medicine last night. But you think that she might be an enemy?" Emilia whispered, her voice growing sad.

Subaru stopped drying the bowls and looked Emilia full in the face. "I don't know, Mili," He said simply. "I just don't know. I'd love to be able to just say that Anri seems very nice and we should trust her and help her as much as we can but we've had to learn the hard way that life just isn't that simple. The past few weeks I've kept seeing people I thought were friends turn out to be enemies."

"Subaru," Emilia objected softly. "You know that wasn't their fault."

Subaru sighed. "I'm not sure that I care a whole lot if it was their 'fault' anymore, Mili. We're dealing with the same mess regardless. Besides, if we're talking about folks like Ayane betraying us, it was *definitely* her fault. And then there's Roswaal. He was playing us like a fiddle the whole time we knew him. I don't know. Maybe I'm going to far in the other direction now, being suspicious of everyone I meet, but we're in a desperate situation here, Mili. We're exhausted and our resources are almost gone. We need to be careful."

Emilia thought and then slowly nodded. "I suppose you're right," She sighed.

"Once we finish cleaning, we'll head out to investigate that lightning show you saw. Then we'll take Anri to Rixum."

Emilia nodded with an unhappy expression on her face.

The other reason I want to be gone for a while is to see if Anri does anything while we're out. If she leaves her cottage and goes 'exploring' that will tell me what she's interested in...

Subaru and Emilia walked through the village as the mist slowly dissipated in the morning sun.

"So this is where you grew up?" Subaru murmured.

Emilia gave him half a smile and slipped an arm around his waist. "Be it ever so humble," She replied.

As the mist finally burned off, Subaru got his first good look at the village and it stopped him in his tracks.

Emilia looked at him. "Subaru? What is it?"

Subaru didn't respond. He stared at the village that lay before him. Village didn't do the place justice. Rather than a few tiny shacks this place would have been a respectable town anywhere in this world. The houses were built among mighty trees that rivaled redwoods. The houses were large and varnished and most had intricate patterns carved into the wood. Their roofs were made of purple stone of some kind. Most amazingly, the town was built in levels. While most houses sat on the forest floor, there was a whole other level far above with houses built into the boughs of the enormous trees and entire neighborhoods overhead were connected by hanging bridges. Almost every major tree had a stairway to the upper levels. Even on the ground, many houses appeared to have physically been built into the trees.

"Subaru! Are you alright?!"

Subaru shook his head in wonder. "This place is amazing," He whispered. He glanced back at Emilia's house. Emilia's home was varnished a golden brown and its shingles were purple, either painted or made from some naturally purple rock. The door was painted a dark green and a crescent moon symbol was carved into the front.

Emilia frowned and looked at the village. "What is?"

"The village! It's awesome! This is exactly the kind of place where elves *should* live!" Subaru said in completely unfeigned excitement. He grabbed the startled Emilia's hand. "Show me more!"

Emilia's surprised face broke into a broad smile. "I'm not sure what I could show you, honestly."

Subaru took her hands in his own. "Show me everything. I want to understand what your life was like before we met. Show me everything that you used to do around here."

Emilia giggled. "That's really not very interesting, Subaru."

Subaru kissed her cheek. "I always find you fascinating, Mili. Maybe you could give me a tour of the village? I've always wanted to see it."

"Really? How come?"

"Well, it just gives me some insight into where you come from and who you were before we met."

"Subaru, I thought you wanted to go investigate the lightning storm?"

Subaru's smile faded. "Oh, right. Yeah. Well, business before pleasure, I guess," He sighed.

Emilia led Subaru to the village stable. The building was old and rundown but the insides seemed to be in good condition. The straw lining the pens was old but Patrasche was wide awake and peered at Subaru over the door of her stall with bright-eyed excitement.

"Hey, Patrasche," Subaru said affectionately, scratching the dragon's head.

She closed her eyes enjoying the sensation.

"Subaru, I never knew that you were so good with animals," Emilia said, sounding impressed.

He laughed. "Neither did I!"

Subaru found her saddlebag hung on the wall. He dug around inside the bag and found some food. It looked like kibble. Subaru found a small bowl in the stable and he filled it up with food for a very excited Patrasche. The dragon quickly dug in.

Huh. That doesn't seem like very much food.

I remember reading somewhere that reptiles need a lot less food than mammals but I don't know if that applies to dragons too.

Patrasche finished the bowl and seemed to have no immediate interest in eating more. She proceeded to nuzzle Subaru's chest.

"The way to a dragon's heart is through her stomach," Subaru murmured to Emilia.

Emilia flashed him a smile.

Subaru led Patrasche outside the stable and then saddled her.

This is a little harder than it looks but at least I got it done. It helps that Patrasche seems to be guiding me in terms of what goes where.

Subaru climbed on top of the dragon and reached down to help pull Emilia into place behind him.

Emilia settled in place and began to fidget.

Subaru glanced back at her. "OK, do you remember where that storm was?"

"Yes. You'll want to go north. It's not especially far from the village," Emilia said in a nervous voice. "Um. I've never ridden an earth dragon before. What should I do?"

Subaru chuckled. "Hold on *tight*."

Emilia jumped and wrapped her arms tightly around Subaru's waist.

"Alright, Pastrache," Subaru said, "You ready to go?"

The earth dragon clucked appreciatively and began to trot through the snow drifts down the snowy trail that led out of the village.

Pastrache took a slow and steady pace as she followed the trail. Patrasche kept glancing back at her passengers.

Oh, you think I'm falling for this, girl? I know that you're setting us up for a practical joke. You're letting me think that you've learned your lesson and that you're going to be chill on this trip. Girl, I am not buying it.

Pastrache kept prancing and clucking as they meandered down the road and out of the village.

It almost sounds like she's humming to herself. Girl, you need to work on your nonchalance.

"Subaru," Emilia sounded grumpy, "Why do I need to hold onto you so tight? This ride feels completely safe. Are you trying to trick me? Is this another lewd thing?"

Pastrache immediately bent over and set herself.

"This is all your fault, Mili," Subaru sighed, "You did this."

Pastrache took off like a rocket, flying over the snowbanks and kicking up great clouds of powdery white snow.

Emilia and Subaru screamed in harmony as they both hung on for dear life.

Emilia buried her face in his shoulder.

"See, this is kind of what I meant when I suggested holding on tight, Mili," Subaru yelled, trying to lean into Patrasche and steer her.

"Subaru!" She cried out, squeezing him almost painfully, "Make her slow down!"

"OK, Mili!" Subaru yelled back. "Sure! Any suggestions on how to do that?!"

A half hour later, Emilia and Subaru rode through the forest. By trial and error, they were getting better at leaning into the dragon and controlling her direction.

"Subaru, are you alright?" Emilia said, raising her voice to be heard over the dragon's thunderous passage as she raced effortlessly over the hard-packed snow. "Are you getting too cold?"

Subaru shook his head. "I'm fine, Mili. You're doing a great job keeping me warm," He chuckled.

"The lightning should have come from somewhere around here, Subaru," Emilia said.

"OK, let's keep our eyes open. A lightning strike shouldn't be hard to find."

Subaru looked around as the woods flew by in a blur.

Well, I say that it shouldn't be hard to find but what am I even looking for? Everything in this forest looks the same to me. Lightning would usually start fires but can anything even burn in this unnatural winter? These trees looks like they're half fossilized only instead of turning to stone, they've turned to ice! Maybe lightning striking a frozen tree wouldn't do anything at all. Maybe it would just dissipate the same way as a bolt of lightning hitting the ocean!

"Subaru! Look up there!" Emilia yelled.

Subaru pulled back on the reins and Patrasche growled at as she came to a halt. She looked back at her riders with thinly veiled irritation. Patrasche was born to *run*. One did not ask Patrasche to stand still. It was a violation of the natural order of things, of the laws of nature. One would no more ask Patrasche to stop running than they could ask a river to stop running.

Subaru shielded his eyes against the sun glittering off the snow and peered up to a large mesa nearby.

He saw several trees up on the mesa had been knocked down or were lying on top of each other at awkward angles.

"That looks promising," Subaru murmured. "Do you know how we can get up there?"

Emilia nodded and pointed off to their left. Subaru nudged Patrasche back into a run.

When they crested the mesa, Subaru immediately reined in Patrasche.

The earth dragon made a sound of protest at her unreasonable rider's frequent pauses but Subaru and Emilia didn't notice.

They looked around the mesa with disbelieving faces.

The mesa was a large plateau at least three hundred yards across and it was covered with a dense grove of tress.

Or at least it *had* been.

What the fuck happened here?! The place looks like an Internet video about strip-mining! Something sent these trees bouncing around like matchsticks and most of them are burned black!

The trees on the northern and southern sides of the mesa were piled up in big messy heaps and several of them were badly burned. Strangely enough, most of the trees on the east/west sides of the mesa had been spared. Some of the fallen trees looked like they'd been sliced up like a stalk of celery. All that was left was countless smooth, circular slices lying in piles on the ground as if the trunks had been attacked by a demented lumberjack. Some of the fallen trees were peppered with holes the size of Subaru's fist that had been drilled straight through the trunks. Strangest of all, some of the fallen trees appeared to have been completely petrified and turned into gleaming, faceted crystal.

The center of the mesa was free bereft of snow. Instead, there was a large shallow pool of ice. At the very center was what looked like a demolished bonfire site, surrounded by a group of badly damaged benches made from shaved logs.

"Subaru, what happened here?" Emilia gasped. "Lightning couldn't have done all this!"

"No, it could not. And I have *no* idea what could have," Subaru replied.

He felt Emilia stiffen behind him. "Subaru... do you think it could be... Regulus?"

Subaru's heart stopped but then he took a deep breath. "I... don't think so. Regulus could easily do this much damage but as far as I know he can't throw lightning or fire. Something not only sent these trees flying, it also burned them to charcoal. And don't even get me started on those trees that somehow turned to fucking glass!" He pointed at the crystallized trunks.

"So what happened here?"

"I don't know!" Subaru said helplessly, nudging Patrasche forward.

Patrasche started to bolt ahead but Subaru tugged the reins.

Patrasche gave her rider an extremely put-upon look but she obediently moved forward at a walk.

"Subaru, where did that fire pit come from?"

"What do you mean?"

"That fire pit doesn't belong here!"

"You mean, your people didn't build it?" Subaru asked.

"I mean that it's *not here*," Emilia emphasized. She hesitated, putting her thoughts in order. "I climbed this mesa after you killed the Snow Blight! I came up here to look for anyplace safe to bring you. When I did, I realized that I wasn't far from home. And that fire pit and all those benches weren't here less than two days ago! This was an empty grove!"

Subaru stared at Emilia for a long moment. "This just keeps getting better and better. So... somebody comes into the forest and builds an elaborate bonfire site in the middle of nowhere in the course of a single day. Then, before the sun sets, the site gets mysteriously destroyed as if it was hit by the world's smallest natural disaster. That sound about right?"

Emilia shook her head. "I don't know, Subaru."

Subaru led the dragon in a slow circle around the outer edge of the blasted zone.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

The world slowed down around him and he felt lightheaded. He was only vaguely aware that he was swaying in the saddle. A piercing pain built up in his head and his muscles ached.

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted. Her voice sounded very slow and he felt her arms slowly wrap tightly around him, holding him steady. "What's wrong?!" She demanded as the world resumed it's normal pace and speed.

Oh, right. I forgot. Something is wrong with Reason and Judgment right now.

Subaru moaned and rubbed his head. "Nothing."

"*Nothing?*!" Emilia asked incredulously.

Subaru hesitated. "I... I think maybe I've been pushing it a little too much lately. That's all."

Something is wrong with my Authority. It's been acting funny ever since the incident at the slaver camp.

Could I have... strained it somehow? Overused it? Is that possible?

"Subaru, I think we should just go home," Emilia said firmly. "You're exhausted and you were really sick only last night! We can do this another day."

Subaru shook his head. "We're already here, Mili. Let's just take a quick look around before leaving. Patrasche is doing all the walking after all."

Emilia's face was disapproving but she nodded reluctantly. "Alright but let's not linger. Do you think that we'll actually find a clue as to who did this?"

"Maybe," Subaru replied as Patrasche patrolled the outer edge of the mesa, occasionally stopping to sniff curiously at a char-broiled log. "We've got nothing to lose by trying. I actually think that it was more than one person. That might be good for us. Although, I guess that would be long odds," Subaru finished, sounding like he was talking to himself.

"More than one person?"

"Yeah. Look at the trees that were destroyed compared to the ones that weren't destroyed. What does that suggest to you?"

"Subaru," Emilia grumbled. "I *know* that you're more clever than me so just tell me what you're thinking. Don't make me guess!"

"Huh. Somebody's feeling touchy today," Subaru murmured.

"*Somebody* is feeling touchy because I'm every bit as exhausted as you!" Emilia snapped. "Not only did I have to trudge all over northern Lagunica with you *and* lose the spirits but I had to endure Daddy's scorn and nurse you back to health after you fell into the frozen lake. Did it ever occur to you that I'm *at least* as tired and frustrated as you are if not more so?!"

Subaru's head snapped around. Emilia was glowering at him and breathing deeply.

Wow. Never seen Emilia like this before. She must really be on edge.

"I'm sorry, Emilia," Subaru said in a placating voice. "I forgot how the past week must have worn you out."

Emilia closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. Finally, she opened them. "That's alright, Subaru," She said in a more composed tone. "So what do you think happened here?"

Subaru looked over the mesa. "Well, the trees on the north and south parts of the mesa were destroyed but not many trees on the east west part. That makes me think that there was a fight here. Two people were throwing magic or something at one another."

"A fight?" Emilia said in surprise. "What could have been fighting here to cause all this damage? Dragons?"

Subaru blinked and he looked at Emilia in real concern. "Mili, are there dragons around here?!"

Emilia shook her head. "I've never seen a dragon, Subaru."

Patrasche came to a halt with a loud honk. She gave her passengers a look of profound offense.

"Um. Present company excepted, of course," Subaru said quickly.

"Yes! I meant... um, I've never seen a... um..." Emilia trailed off. "Well, what I meant to say is that earth dragons obviously have all the majesty and grandeur of their distant ancestors. Even Volcanica can't compare to the dignity of an earth dragon!"

Patrasche looked slightly mollified and resumed her slow march around the mesa.

Subaru and Emilia shared a look that was equal parts amused and incredulous.

Emilia cleared her throat. "As I was saying, Subaru," She continued. "I've never seen a... dragon," She whispered. "I think that there are only a handful left. Maybe Volcanica is the last one..."

"OK. Well then, let's assume for right now that this wasn't a pair of dragons fighting," Subaru replied. "This must have been a really big fight. Like... a Reinhard versus Regulus level of fight maybe."

"But what could have done this? Do you think that they could have come to the forest looking for us?" She worried.

Subaru thought about it, then shook his head. "If Regulus knew that we were here, he would have torn up the whole forest until he found us. He's not one for holding back. And I doubt that any fight he's ever been in has been restricted to this small of an area. Reinhard would be the same way. As careful as he is, I think that if he was really pushed to the limit during a fight he'd be hard pressed to contain his power. The destruction would have been a lot more wide spread than this."

"So that means that we have no idea who did this?" Emilia murmured.

"Not really," Subaru admitted. "But maybe the fact that there were two of them is a good sign."

"How?"

Subaru hesitated. "...Maybe two people who hated each other just happened to bump into one another in the forest and they had it out. Maybe them being here had nothing to do with us at all!"

"Subaru," Emilia said skeptically. "I spent my whole life in this forest and never saw anything like this. We're back for less than two days and a large section of the forest has already been demolished. And you think that this has nothing to do with us?!"

Subaru sighed as Patrasche completed her circuit of the mesa and returned to the slope they had climbed to reach it. "Yeah, I know. Wishful thinking. Hey, Mili, how did you recognize that you were near home from seeing this plateau. Did you come here a lot?"

"No, not really," Emilia admitted. "This area was off limits when I was child. But it's extremely recognizable."

"How come?"

"Because of that," Emilia said, pointing at the middle of the mesa.

Subaru followed her finger and frowned. He hadn't noticed it before but there was... a line in the middle of the plateau. A fat purple line that just... stood there.

"What is that?" Subaru asked in confusion.

He nudged Patrasche closer.

"Be careful, Subaru," Emilia said, sounding nervous.

As they drew closer, Subaru realized that it wasn't a line. That was just an optical illusion because he had been looking at the thinnest part of the object. As Patrasche walked around it, Subaru realized that it was a door. A beautiful, ornate, double-sided door made of some kind of polished, dark purple stone. It must have been ten feet tall and wider than Subaru could spread his arms.

And it was standing in the middle of the mesa, unconnected to anything.

Subaru looked at Emilia in disbelief. "What the hell is this?!"

Emilia shook her head. "I don't know, Subaru. I just know that I was supposed to stay far, far away from it."

"Why?"

Emilia just shrugged.

Subaru awkwardly slipped down from the saddle to investigate the door.

"Subaru!" Emilia said, jumping down beside him. "Be careful!"

"Of?" Subaru asked.

Emilia just bit her lip.

Subaru gingerly reached out his hand and touched the door with a finger. The door felt like cold stone but otherwise seemed unremarkable. Subaru pushed the door but nothing happened.

Subaru looked at Emilia. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

Emilia shook her head. "I just know that I and most of the other elves were forbidden to come near here."

Subaru scratched his head. "Who the hell builds a door in the middle of nowhere? And what's even holding it up?!"

Emilia hung back, looking at the door with trepidation.

Subaru thought for a moment. "Mili, give me a hand."

"Subaru," She whispered in disapproval as she reluctantly complied.

The door wouldn't budge no matter which side they pushed on. There seemed to be nothing anchoring it in place but pushing it felt like trying to shift a mountain.

Subaru finally sighed in resignation. "OK. New theory. Whoever came here, they came here for *this*. Maybe they were fighting over it."

"The door? Why?"

Subaru threw his hands into the air. "Mili, I have absolutely no idea!" He said as he returned to Patrasche and remounted her. "I don't anything about this door so I can't even guess why somebody would want it!"

"I don't know what this door is, Subaru. I just know that the village elders and Mother Fortuna and Guese thought that it was very important," She said, climbing up behind him.

"Well, that's not much help," Subaru said, nudging Patrasche back toward the slope that led down from the mesa.

"Subaru, I-"

"Wait!" Subaru said, pulling Patrasche to a halt by the slope. He peered down into the snow. "Footprints."

He studied them for a moment. "Well, they don't look like either of ours."

Emilia looked down at the snow. "If we followed them," She said reluctantly, "Do you think that they'd lead us to whoever did this? Because I don't think that we're ready for that kind of fight, Subaru."

"Trust me, I agree!" Subaru said fervently. "But I don't think following these footprints would lead us to anyone."

"They won't?" She asked in confusion. Emilia looked at the tracks more closely and then nodded. "Oh. Those footprints are coming *to* this clearing."

"Yeah," Subaru replied, deep in thought. "This must be how one of our friends got here. The strange thing is that we looked around the entire mesa and while there are footprints leading in... there *aren't* any leading out..."

"Maybe they both killed each other?" Emilia suggested.

"We would have found bodies," Subaru disagreed.

"Well... they might have completely destroyed each other," Emilia mused. "Or maybe they used magic to leave."

Emilia's eyes suddenly widened. "Subaru! What about Roswaal?!"

"Roswaal?"

"Roswaal is a powerful magic caster! He could easily destroy an area like this and we know that he can fly! And Subaru, he knows where the village is!"

Subaru frowned. "Does he?" He said after a moment's thought. "I mean, I can't think of any reason why Roswaal would be able to remember you when the rest of the world forget. I doubt that he has any reason to be looking around in the forest for me. He shouldn't remember *anything* about you."

Emilia's face grew gloomy as she pondered that.

Subaru shielded his eyes and looked off the mesa. "Mili, do those tracks look like they lead back toward the village?"

Emilia jumped. "They do?!" She looked at the trail of tracks that lead down the slope and south through the forest. "Yes. They do seem to be going that way. Subaru, do you think that *Anri* might really have had something to do with this?!"

"I don't see how," Subaru admitted. "If you mean, did she make these tracks then I don't know how much sense that would make. I can't imagine that she woke up last night and walked here. Or how she could have destroyed the grove in the first place, much less how she could have gone back to the village without leaving any tracks. But if these tracks come *from* the village then maybe..."

Subaru stopped talking.

"What?"

Subaru shook his head. "I'm not sure," Subaru murmured. "And I'd rather not guess right now until we see where these tracks actually lead. I have a theory but... Let's just follow the tracks for now. They're heading in the same direction that we need to go anyway."

Subaru nudged Patrasche and the suddenly cheerful riding dragon took off at a run.

Subaru and Emilia followed the tracks through the forest. The tracks went down a broad forest trail and then met and followed the river.

Patrasche leaped onto the frozen river with a joyful cry. After years of eternal winter, the ice must have been ten feet thick and it took the riding dragon's weight easily. Her claws gave her good traction on the ice and the dragon raced along the frozen river at great speed.

"Well, at least Patrasche seems to be enjoying herself!" Subaru shouted, trying to keep a close eye on the footprints that hugged the riverbank.

"I'm glad that one of us is!" Emilia yelled back, desperately holding onto Subaru. "This is not very much fun for me!"

Subaru sighed. "Beatrice had the same opinion," He replied in a morose tone.

They followed the winding river as it roamed through the forest and led back toward the village.

The village was in sight when Subaru saw something on the riverbank and reined in, much to Patrasche's surprise. The riding dragon went skidding across the slick ice and nearly lost her footing before catching her balance.

Patrasche gave Subaru a reproachful look and an annoyed cluck.

"Sorry, girl," Subaru said, half sliding, half falling out of the saddle onto the frozen river. "Next time, I'll try to give you more warning when we're going to stop." He reached up to help Emilia down.

"Subaru, why are we stopping here?" Emilia asked.

"You see that skid mark on the hill?" He replied.

Emilia glanced at it. "Yes. What do you think caused it?"

"I did," Subaru muttered. He glanced at Patrasche. "You know, girl, I think that you might have saved my life last night."

Patrasche gave a low honk.

I'm pretty sure that was Earth dragon for 'No shit.'

"Subaru, what are you talking about?" Emilia asked.

Subaru squatted down by the skid mark on the hill. "Mili, these were the tracks that I was following last night," Subaru explained. "I thought that they were *your* tracks so I was following them. If Patrasche hadn't interrupted me, I would have marched straight up to the mesa and found... whoever was waiting up there."

Emilia's eyes were wide. "Then someone *was* trying to lure you into a trap!"

"Probably. I mean, I guess so," Subaru said slowly.

"You guess?"

Subaru raised his eyes heavenward. "I mean... This still still doesn't make any sense! Why leave a note to lure me into a trap if the person that you're trying to trap is lying there helpless? Beyond that, if they saw me lying in bed, they should have realized that I *never* could have made it to that mesa alive! In the state that I was in, I would have frozen to death or died from exhaustion long before I got anywhere close!" Subaru shook his head. "So whatever plan they had that was trying to get me to the mesa was doomed to fail from the start. And why were they so desperate to get me to that place anyway? Why steal the note afterward? None of this make sense!"

Emilia shook her head. "So they tried to lure you to the mesa... But then what happened? The people waiting on the mesa threw a tantrum when they realized that you weren't coming and destroyed everything?"

Subaru frowned. "Maybe... maybe they were interrupted."

"Interrupted?"

"Well, try this one on for size. Someone goes into the cottage and rewrites your note. I still don't know *why* they did that but let's skip it for right now. Then they laid down tracks up to the mesa to wait for me to come and find them. They sit there waiting at that bonfire site. Then... someone *else* shows up. Someone who either doesn't like the first person or doesn't like... whatever it is that they're doing here. So there's a fight. And then..."

"And then?" Emilia prodded.

Subaru sighed. "I don't know, Mili," He muttered. "There's too much going on here that I don't understand! What was the point of leaving that note for me and why are there footprints leading to the mesa but none that lead away? And why was there only one set of footprints when all the signs indicated that there were two people on the mesa?"

Subaru frowned and looked up at Patrasche. "Now that I think about it, girl," Subaru said slowly. "What are the odds of *you* showing up on the exact same night as all of this happening and you *not* being involved somehow? How do *you* factor into all this?"

Patrasche cocked her head.

Subaru sighed. "Moments like this, I really wish that you could talk, girl."

Emilia shook her head. "Subaru, it's nearly noontime. If we're going to go to Rixum today then we had better get started. You still can't weather the night temperatures in the forest very well."

Subaru nodded, "Good point." He climbed on top of Patrasche and pulled Emilia up behind him. He nudged the riding dragon and she sprinted back to the village.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered. "Do you think that Anri had anything to do with this?"

Subaru hesitated. "I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know if I can trust Anri but where does that leave us?"

Emilia was quiet for a long time. "If we can't trust her then... should we really expect her to keep our location a secret?"

Subaru didn't respond immediately. "I know, Mili. I've been thinking the same thing. But then what? We can't just keep Anri a prisoner here forever. And I won't even discuss the alternative..."

Subaru felt Emilia nod against his back.

Subaru and Emilia dismounted Patrasche and knocked on the door of the house where Anri was staying.

The girl opened the door. Her gaze briefly flickering to the dragon.

"So, are we leaving?" She asked her face brightening.

"If you feel up to it," Subaru replied.

"I'm ready!" She shouted, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "But, Emilia, do you think that we could stop at the clearing where we met? I have... another bag that I'd like to retrieve and," Anri's face became somber again. "I really should make a grave for Hunnicutt."

"Was he the man you were traveling with?" Emilia asked.

Anri nodded and bowed her head.

"I'm sorry," Subaru said. "Where you very close?"

Anri shook her head. "No. Honestly, I barely knew him but..." She trailed off.

Subaru frowned. *Hang on. She's traveling with a man deep into a haunted forest and she barely knows him?*

"I'm sorry," Emilia continued. "I don't think you'll have much luck making a grave in the forest. The ground is just too hard to cut through."

Anri looked stricken. "So I just have to leave him lying out here to be picked at by scavengers?!"

Emilia shook her head. "There are no scavengers in the forest. Just mabeasts and they don't eat."

Subaru watched as Anri's face slowly became resigned. "I suppose that the snow is as good a blanket for his slumber as a layer of earth would be. But it still feels wrong."

Subaru shrugged. "You can only do what you can do. We can't bury him here and we have no way to bring him out of the forest and bury him. Because if anyone saw us carrying a corpse around, that would be serious attention that we don't need," Subaru said meaningfully.

Anri sighed, "That's true, I guess." Anri forced herself to put on a smile. "Well, I suppose we might as well get going then. Can we still try to grab my stuff?"

"I don't see why not," Emilia shrugged. "It's not far out of the way."

"Alright well, let's get moving," Subaru said, climbing back into Patrasche's saddle.

He pulled Emilia up behind him.

Anri stepped forward to caress the riding dragon's face. Patrasche closed her eyes, clearly enjoying the attention.

"This is a magnificent animal," Anri whispered. "Where did you find her?"

"She was a gift," Subaru said shortly.

"Wow. This was a kingly gift," Anri admired. "Was it from a close friend?"

"Actually, it was from a close enemy," Subaru snorted.

Anri looked at Subaru in confusion. Emilia just rolled her eyes at him.

Subaru sighed. "It's a long story, Anri and I really don't want to get into it. Let's just get going."

Anri frowned. "But where am I going to sit?"

Subaru shrugged. "You can sit in front of me."

"In *front* of you?" Anri repeated.

"You got a better idea?" Subaru asked.

Anri looked pained. She slowly reached up to take Subaru's hand. "Alright but just... watch where you put your hands, OK?"

Subaru rolled his eyes as he helped Anri get settled in front of him. "Yes, Anri. I'll try my very best to control myself," He said sarcastically.

Subaru nudged Patrasche and she flew off like a bolt of lightning.

Anri bowed her head over the ruins of Hunnicutt's body.

Subaru and Emilia stood by awkwardly as Anri knelt down and began to pray.

Emilia gestured and both she and Subaru turned around to give her some privacy.

They stood there, wondering if there was anything they should be doing.

"Alright, I'm done," Anri called.

Subaru and Emilia turned around to see her picking up a large knapsack.

"You got everything?" Subaru asked.

Anri sighed. "Luckily, yes. I have everything I need."

The sun was just starting to set when Patrasche broke through the trees and thundered across an open meadow. Subaru could see a large number of houses built along the king's highway in the distance.

What the hell is that? Subaru thought as he checked Patrasche and slowed the dragon to a halt. For once, Patrasche didn't seem inclined to argue as the dragon was finding this meadow to be equally fascinating.

It looks like someone drew a line right down the meadow. On one side you have snow and ice. On the other side, you have green, new grass. Patrasche has a claw in two different seasons right now. Even the air feels different! My left arm is freezing but my right arm feels like it's a balmy, early summer afternoon!

This is amazing!

"Wow," Anri murmured. "I've never seen anything like this before..."

"Subaru," Emilia said, sounding aggravated. "Do we really need to sit here like this?"

"This is some *amazing* magic!" Anri said in awe. "Do either of you know what caused it?"

"Why would *we* know?" Emilia replied sharply before Subaru could respond.

Anri looked at Emilia, taken aback by her tone. "Well, you did say that you grew up in the forest. I just thought that you might know what really happened. The locals have a dozen different stories about it. I heard a few of them while I was traveling. A barmaid told me that the forest was the sight of a fight between the Black Snake and a Dragon. She said that the Dragon froze the forest solid during the fight. An old woman told me that the forest is home to an enchanted elven princess who's trapped in a magical slumber, waiting for her true love to come and rescue her."

Subaru gave Emilia an amused smile.

She didn't smile back.

"But most folks," Anri continued. "Claim that the forest was cursed by a terrible witch long ago."

Emilia flinched.

Subaru frowned and nudge Patrasche back into motion. "Look, let's leave history alone for right now. We need to be focused on our future. We have no food and you need to see about finding a ride."

"Sounds good to me," Anri said calmly as they flew down the road toward the town.

Subaru reined in Patrasche just inside the town border.

Subaru helped Anri and Emilia slid down and then dropped to the ground himself.

Emilia pulled her hood forward as far as it would go.

Anri walked to the highway a short distance away and stared at the wagons moving in and out of town. Even late in the day there was still a lot of traffic. She looked carefully for signs of the merchant's destination.

Subaru made to put Patrasche's reins around the hitching post but she jerked her head, nearly pulling the reins out of his hands.

Subaru looked up and the earth dragon stared down at him reproachfully.

"Not big on hitching posts?" Subaru asked.

Patrasche clucked.

Subaru made a face. "Alright, fine," He said, letting go of the reins with a sigh. "But stay here and try not to cause trouble. We shouldn't be long."

Patrasche clucked.

"Anri, how do you plan to find a merchant going... wherever you want to go?" Emilia asked, raising her voice so Anri could hear her.

"Oh, that shouldn't be a problem," Anri said calmly. "I'll go find a tavern where the merchants congregate and feel around. I should be able to find someone going my way."

Anri lowered her voice. "At least, I think I can," She murmured to herself. "What would be the signs of a wagon that's headed to Iruk?"

"*Iruk?!*" Emilia called incredulously. "You're trying to get to Iruk?!"

Anri jumped and spun around. "How did you hear..." Anri trailed off as her eyes fixed on Emilia's ears.

Emilia flushed uncomfortably.

Anri made a face. "OK. Well, just keep it a secret, OK? Please?" Anri asked plaintively.

Subaru shrugged. "You keep quiet about us, we keep quiet about you. Sounds fair to me."

"Great," Anri sighed in relief.

"Anri," Emilia said in utter confusion. "Iruk is in completely the opposite direction! We could have taken you to Iruk in half the time that it took us to come to Rixum!"

Anri winced. "Well, I don't know the area very well. Don't worry. I'm sure that I can still buy a ride. I don't want to put you guys out anymore than I already have," She added, looking guilty.

"Don't worry about it," Subaru shrugged. "Incidentally, do you have enough money to purchase a ride or do you need any?"

Anri looked at Subaru in surprise. "Thanks, Subaru," She said. "But I should have plenty to get where I need to go. Like I said, I don't want to go any deeper in your debt than I already am."

"Anri, I'm sorry but I don't think that you'll be able to find transportation here," Emilia apologized.

Anri started. "Why not? I thought that Rixum was the closest town to Iruk!"

Emilia scrunched her face up in thought. "Well... Yes, I suppose that it probably is..."

"What's the problem, Mili?" Subaru asked.

"*Mili?*" Anri repeated with a chuckle. "That's actually kind of adorable!"

Emilia flushed but ignored her. "I've never actually been in Iruk but I've seen it several times. It's just beyond the northeastern edge of the forest, over the border into Gusteko-"

"Keep your voice down!" Anri hissed.

"But Iruk is a one road town," Emilia continued. "It's smaller even than Arlem! There can't be more than a few dozen people living there. I doubt that merchants go there with any kind of regularity. I suppose that you might get lucky and find someone going there tonight but I think that you'd have to be very lucky to find someone."

Subaru sighed and rubbed his forehead. "OK. Well, I'm sure we can put Anri up for one more night. Tomorrow, we'll just bring her to Iruk ourselves. Heck, it'll save her some money."

"Um. Tomorrow?" Anri's voice held an objection that carried no force.

"Tomorrow," Subaru said firmly. "Anri, it's almost dark now. By the time we do our shopping and get back to the village it will be pitch black outside. I don't want to go stumbling through the forest looking for Iruk in the dark. There are mabeasts and maybe even worse things in that wood. We'll take you there first thing tomorrow."

Anri looked at Emilia in appeal but Emilia just shook her head.

Anri deflated slightly. "Well, thank you both very much. I really appreciate all the trouble that you've gone through to help me. I promise that I'll try to find a way to make it up to you."

Subaru shrugged. "Don't sweat it. It's just nice to help somebody out after everything that we've been through. I have a feeling that we've been where you are. In some ways, we're *still* there."

Anri gave them a bittersweet smile. "I'm really sorry to hear that. 'Where I am' is a tough place to be..."

The trio began to walk into town, approaching the market that was still bustling as the sun set.

"Subaru," Anri asked. "What did you mean by worse than mabeasts?"

Subaru shrugged. "Well, the forest is supposed to be haunted, you know," He hedged.

Anri jumped and her eyes became huge. "Is that really true?!" Anri asked in astonishment. "Emilia, have you ever seen a ghost?"

Subaru glanced at Emilia out of the corner of his eye. She walked beside them silently, her expression and manner somber. "Many times," She replied quietly. "But they were only the spirits conjured from my own memories."

Subaru, Emilia, and Anri walked through the open market. The center of town was an enormous collection of stalls and stands. A few merchants called out their wares as the group passed but most shopkeepers seemed to consider the day

over and they just chatted with their neighbors and customers.

"Mili, any idea what we should be looking for?" Subaru asked, looking uncomfortably at a skinned rabbit hanging from a rope above a stall.

"I'm not really sure," Emilia replied. "I didn't buy food very often when I last lived in the forest. I'm not sure what we should get."

Subaru glanced at her. "Didn't you need to supplement your diet? I can't imagine that you found much variety of foods in the forest and you probably struggled to forage at all when the weather was bad. What did you do if you couldn't find anything to eat in the woods?"

"I went hungry," Emilia said, matter-of-fact.

Anri looked at Emilia in dismay. "Um. OK look, I realize that we barely know each other and that my opinion probably doesn't count for very much but you guys *really* need to come up with a better strategy."

"Trust me, it's high on my to-do list," Subaru sighed.

This really bites. My number one priority should be to find Beatrice and Puck. My number two priority should be to break Emilia's curse.

What am I doing instead? Bringing Anri to a town that she apparently didn't even need to go to and now I'm out shopping for groceries!

The problem is, I can't act like this isn't critical too. We're no good to Beatrice if we starve to death in the woods. And the sooner we get Anri out of the forest, the sooner we can focus on bigger, more important matters. But despite how necessary doing these things is, they're both still just distractions from bigger problems.

"OK," Subaru continued. "Mili, what do you know how to cook?"

"Soup," Emilia murmured in reply. "What about you, Subaru?"

He chuckled ruefully. "I guess I know how to cook over a campfire a little. Not that I ever did it very much. Back home my culinary talents were mostly limited to making cereal and heating up microwave burritos."

Anri and Emilia both gave him a strange look. "Subaru," Anri said. "I've never heard of either of those things. Where are you from exactly?"

"Far away," Subaru replied with a sigh.

"What, like Vollachia?"

"Yeah, something like that," Subaru replied. He and Emilia exchanged amused smiles and their hands found each other as they walked through the market.

"Did you ever come here before?" Subaru asked Emilia.

"Once in a while. I would occasionally bring pyroxene crystals here to trade for items," Emilia replied.

"Did the people here treat you OK?" Subaru said.

Emilia made a face. "Well... Puck had to threaten a few of them to make them back off but then things seemed to be alright. The townspeople never exactly warmed up to me but they stopped trying to kill me at least."

Subaru gaped at her. "They tried to kill you?!" Subaru said in fury.

Emilia nodded. "This village was assaulted a few years ago by the Witch Cult. I understand that they took several casualties in the fighting. This wasn't a good place for me to shop but it was really my only option."

Subaru looked aghast. Then he shook his head and tried to focus on more immediate problems. "OK. Well if we're going to be making do off soups and stews then we should just buy a lot of vegetables and maybe some meat for flavor."

He suddenly thought of something. "I guess keeping the food fresh in the forest won't be terribly difficult."

Emilia shook her head. "Before the... incident, the village used a magic ice room to keep food cold. I've never seen the need to use it since then."

"Guess not," Subaru said, inspecting a stall that seemed devoted to vegetables. He picked up what he thought was an onion and sniffed it.

"Subaru," Emilia said. "Do you really think we should buy a lot of food?"

"Well, if it won't go bad in the cold then why not?" Subaru replied.

"No, I mean... how long do you think we'll be in the forest?" She asked quietly.

Subaru quickly looked up and saw Anri looking at some bread rolls in another booth. Subaru quickly wrapped his arms around Emilia and pulled her close. "I'm not sure, Mili," He said honestly. "I really don't know what to do now. Before

we can leave the forest, we'll need to have a destination in mind. But whether it's to rescue the spirits or to try and break your curse, I just don't know where we want to go or how we'll even *figure out* where to go. There's thousands of places that the spirits could be and I don't know how we're going to narrow it down. And I'm no closer to figuring out how to lift your curse than I was the day that we left the Sanctuary..." He said despairingly.

Emilia held him tight, feeling the exhaustion in his voice. "We'll figure it out, Subaru," She promised. "Like you keep saying, as long as we're together, we can do anything."

They smiled at one another as they separated.

Subaru turned back to the stall and started inspecting vegetables. "How about we buy some carrots, potatoes, and mushrooms? They should be easy to chop up and they should give the soup we make a little more flavor," Subaru said, hearing some children playing in the background. They were running around, chasing one another. "Maybe we can grab some meat cuts as well. We need some protein in our diet and-"

"Oh!" Emilia shouted as a laughing little girl accidentally plowed into her, knocking them both down.

Subaru spun around to see Emilia and the little girl had fallen to the hard ground. Emilia's hood had fallen back and her silver hair and ears were clearly visible. The formally noisy market was suddenly quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

Emilia hit the ground hard and shook her head, trying to clear it. A moment later, she realized that her hood had fallen off and the little girl was staring at Emilia with wide-eyed horror.

"It's a witch!" The child screamed in a piercing voice.

Emilia recoiled from the child's terrified pronunciation as if it was the blow from a flail.

The girl scrambled backwards as fast as she could then leaped to her feet and ran away, tears in her eyes and screaming for her mother.

"Anri!" Subaru shouted as he helped Emilia up. Anri raced to their side as the crowd began to circle around them.

The townsmen were clearly terrified but that fear was starting to shift. Fear is fertile and it breeds anger and hate.

"What is *that*?" A merchant with a bushy mustache spat.

"It's a witch!" A plump housewife cried, trying to hide behind the basket of goods she carried.

"She's not a witch!" Subaru shouted. "She's just an elf!"

"My grandmother told me that there were witches in the great forest," An elderly woman whispered. Her frail, wrinkled body trembled violently, seemingly as much from terror as from age.

"Call the guards! Sound the alarm!" A young woman screamed. Her face was barely visible as she hid trembling behind a market stall, a fat merchant cowering beside her.

"Look!" Subaru shouted, putting up his hands and trying to placate the crowd. "We don't want any trouble here! We're leaving right now, OK?"

Emilia's head suddenly snapped back and she saw a bright flash of pain. She clapped her hand to her temple and it came away wet with blood.

"Emilia!" Subaru screamed, grabbing her in his arms. The pair scanned the crowd until they saw a boy of no more than seven who was holding stones in his hands. Tears were streaming down his face. "You filthy witch! Give me back my Dad!"

He threw another stone that went wide.

"Your Dad?" Emilia asked in a confused voice as she held her now throbbing head.

A woman wearing a shopkeeper's apron leaped toward the boy. She held him close, her eyes terrified. "Please! Have mercy! He's just a boy, I'm sorry! He didn't know what he was doing! Forgive us!"

The boy was crying as well but his rage eclipsed his fear. "Go away, you disgusting witch! Leave my family alone!" The boy shouted, struggling to throw more stones while his mother restrained him.

"Please have mercy on my son! I'm begging you!" They were both crying as they sat there on the frozen ground with their arms wrapped around each other.

"You little brat!" Subaru roared at the child.

The child froze, his eyes growing wide. The stones fell from nerveless fingers as he trembled in his mother's arms.

"You serving the witch, boy?" A fat middle-aged man snarled. "You put to stud for her? You making dirty elf babies in that belly?"

The crowd began to close in around them. The locals who carried weapons drew them and the rest picked up sticks and stones. Their formally terrified faces were now savage caricatures of dark joy as they prepared to punish the thing that

had so frightened them. They had been terrified of Emilia but now they'd seen that she could be wounded. The mob had tasted blood and it wanted more.

"Kill them all!" Someone shouted.

"Call the guards!" Someone shouted.

"Burn her!"

That did it. All the past week's frustrations boiled over as the crowd of sickening bullies snapped Subaru's very last nerve.

"Burn her?!" Subaru shouted in a voice that silenced the crowd. "You've got no proof at all that she's a witch but you say burn her. Well, how would *you* all like to be used as kindling?!" He roared.

The crowd drew back slightly.

"You want to see a witch?! I'll show you a wicked witch!" Subaru shouted, feeling power welling up deep inside of him.

The crowd recoiled. They looked at one another in horror. They could sense a vast power surging within the strange boy. They didn't understand it but they knew that it was far beyond anything they could deal with.

Subaru pointed at them. "*Pridebreaker!*" He roared.

A wave of power swept over the terrified crowd. A few fell down and several shook their heads in a panic.

A few moments passed and the the panic slowly began to fade into confusion as nothing seemed to happen.

Subaru looked at them, baffled.

Wait. It didn't work?! Why not? Does it not work on humans or something?!

Fuck! Bluff!

Subaru drew himself up to his full height. "That was but a taste of my power!" He shouted. "You who attack an unarmed girl are undeserving of my mercy!"

Subaru reached down deep inside of him, trying to trigger the Authority's true power, like he did in the slaver's camp but something felt like it was in his way.

Subaru reached as deep as he could and then-

He threw up.

Subaru bent over and vomited a disgusting black spew that looked like sludge and smelled like raw sewage. It was thick and sticky. Subaru felt as if the noxious payload was slowly crawling up his throat. He had to fight to get each disgusting mouthful out.

By the time he was done throwing up, Subaru felt utterly drained.

"Subaru!"

Subaru felt a hand grab his arm. He turned to see Emilia with tears in her eyes. "Please let's just get out of here!"

Subaru's attention snapped back to the crowd but his moment of intimidation had passed.

A burly man drew a ungainly sword that looked like a meat cleaver. "Kill them!" He roared to the crowd's road of approval.

"Let's get out of here!" Subaru shouted as he pulled Emilia away at a run.

Anri watched in amazement for a moment before her eyes widened and she tore off after them.

"Get them! Don't let them get away!" Someone screamed.

"Burn all three witches!" Another shouted.

Subaru ran back to Patrasche as fast as he could and he heard the crowd surging after them.

Patrasche sensed her master's distress and came running.

Subaru climbed up quickly and Emilia hopped on behind him.

Subaru and Emilia pulled Anri up and slung her across the front of the saddle. Patrasche broke into a run before Anri was even secured.

The riding dragon flew out of the town as fast as she could as the crowd flung stones, and whatever else they could find after them.

Anri almost fell off Patrasche and had to make a desperate grab for the dragon's mane to hang on.

"Subaru!" Anri shouted. "I'm slipping!" With only one good arm Anri could barely hold onto the dragon's neck.

"No, you're not!" Subaru shouted back, grabbing her by the cloak. "I've got you! Just hang on for a minute. We'll get a little distance away from that lynch mob and then help you up!"

Patrasche snorted indignantly at the dangling Anri.

"Emilia! Are you alright? How bad is that cut?!" Subaru shouted as Patrasche raced across the grassy field and back onto the snow.

"It's not deep," Emilia murmured but Subaru thought that her voice sounded slurred.

"I can take a look when we get back to the village," Anri promised as she and Subaru struggled to hold her in place atop the speeding dragon. "It didn't look bad!"

Subaru looked behind them but it appeared that no one was giving chase.

Patrasche ran under the forest eaves as the sun finally set and Subaru reined her in.

Anri let go of the dragon and landed gracefully on the ground.

"Let me help you up," Subaru said, reaching down. He pulled Anri onto the saddle in front of him.

"Thanks," She muttered.

"Anri! Can you take a look at Emilia," Subaru begged. Emilia was slumped against his shoulder, muttering something. She seemed barely conscious.

Anri leaned over Subaru's shoulder and closely inspect Emilia's head.

"It's not serious. This cut is barely more than a scratch," Anri said.

"You're sure?" Subaru demanded.

Anri nodded. "She's in no danger at all, Subaru."

"I feel fine," Emilia murmured in a slurred voice, her head slumped against Subaru's shoulder.

Anri half smiled. "At least *this* I know how to do," Anri touched Emilia's head and whispered a few words.

Subaru watched as the cut on Emilia's head faded away, not leaving any trace of its existence aside from some dried blood.

Emilia's eyes which had been dull with pain, sharpened. She touched her forehead with wonder.

"Anri, you know healing magic?" Emilia asked.

Anri shrugged. "Just a little bit. I don't have much talent with magic so I make up the difference with herb lore and practical medicine."

Anri slid down off the dragon.

Subaru and Emilia looked at her in confusion.

"Emilia, you and I are going to swap seats for the trip back," Anri explained. "You're is going to ride in front so that Subaru can hold onto you. I'll ride in back."

"Anri, I'm really fine-" Emilia said.

"Healer's orders!" Anri said sharply. "You got hit in the head and you might have a mild concussion. You can find yourself falling asleep without any warning. So you're going to ride in front where Subaru can hold you."

"This is really unnecessary," Emilia protested.

"I think maybe we should listen," Subaru murmured. "She knows more about injuries than we do."

Emilia looked resigned as Subaru helped her slide down from Patrasche and then climb up in front of him.

Subaru pulled Anri up behind him.

Patrasche watched in fascination as the three people mounted on her back played this strange game.

Subaru nudged Patrasche back into a run and she fled deeper into the dark forest.

Patrasche ran up to Emilia's cottage and Subaru reined her in.

Subaru helped Emilia and Anri climb down.

"Mili, why don't you go lay down," Subaru sighed. "I'll be back in a few minutes to start dinner with whatever food we

have left."

"Subaru, I am not an invalid. I'm perfectly capable of preparing soup. Besides, where are you going?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged. "Got to bring Patrasche back to the stable and feed her!"

"Oh. Right," Emilia murmured.

"I'll be back soon!" Subaru said as he rode Patrasche off.

"Damn, Emilia, was that thing in Rixum normal for you?" Anri asked as they worked together to peel and chop Emilia's last few remaining vegetables.

"Yes. Most people want to kill me on sight," Emilia sighed.

Anri shook her head while peeling some wild carrots with a knife. "I'm really sorry to hear that. That's got to make life all kinds of difficult!"

"Yes, it does," She agreed, peeling potatoes.

"And Subaru stays by you through it all?" Anri asked, peeling a carrot.

Emilia flinched but Anri didn't notice due to her focus on the carrots. "Yes," Emilia almost whispered. "Subaru has stood by me through everything. No matter how much I mess up or how bad things get..."

Anri kept peeling. "It's funny. I keep feeling like I've heard that before," Anri mused.

"Heard what before?" Emilia asked absently.

"Subaru. I *know* that I've heard that name somewhere," Anri murmured.

Emilia stiffened. "I wouldn't worry about it," Emilia said awkwardly. "Names are very common after all."

"I guess you're right," Anri shrugged.

They worked in silence for a moment. "So where are you guys from originally?" Anri asked.

"Um," Emilia hesitated. "I was born in the forest. I think."

"Wow. Really? Wait, you think?"

"My family is all dead. My earliest memories are of the forest but there's no one left to ask if I originally came from somewhere else."

"And you've been here ever since?"

"Yes. I grew up here. I've spent my entire life here except for a brief time that I lived in, um, Arlem," Emilia hedged.

"Arlem," Anri said thoughtfully. "I've heard that name too..."

Suddenly the girl dropped her knife and stared at Emilia with wide, terrified eyes. "Wait... Subaru... Natsuki?! The Butcher of Arlem?!"

"Butcher?!" Emilia shouted in outrage.

Anri flinched. She looked at Emilia with huge eyes, like a child who had been snapped at. "I mean... I heard that he killed sixty Gusteko soldiers from Walla who had gotten lost across the border, while they begged for their lives," She whispered.

Emilia snorted. "Anri, there weren't even sixty soldiers *in* Arlem!" She said scathingly. "I was there! And any begging that those soldiers did was after they'd already threatened to kill a village full of unarmed civilians. I saw the stakes that the soldiers had set up for their heads! Those soldiers went to Arlem to kill innocent people and they deserved a far worse fate than they received!"

Anri just stared at her in shock.

Emilia looked away, her face twisting in remembered pain. "Subaru... let most of the soldiers escape. He killed some of them. I remember how scared he said he was... how horrified he was at what he'd been forced to do. I held him that night while he cried and sobbed. I wished that I could find a way to ensure that he never had to do anything like that ever again..."

"Wait a minute. You're saying that he *cried*?" Anri asked incredulously.

Emilia whirled on Anri, her eyes flashing. "My Subaru is very kind! He hates having to hurt people!"

"Wow," Anri whispered. She thought for a moment and then slowly picked up her knife and started to peel more carrots. "Honestly, I guess that makes sense. The story of the Massacre at Arlem is pretty common where I come from. Most people believe it. Then again, I guess House Voivode and House Griest lying about the incident is no real surprise. It is the kind of thing they would do. And the notion that these soldiers just got lost dozens of miles over the border is

pretty hard to swallow. I don't know Subaru very well but I can't really see him slaughtering people for no damn reason. Although, I got to admit that I thought that the folks of Rixum were in for it tonight. Subaru looked like he might have killed the whole lot of them with his bare hands. At least until he got sick. And what was that slop that he threw up? Was that just from breakfast or-

Anri froze and her head snapped up to stare at Emilia in wonder. "Holy shit. You must be that witch! I can't believe that I just put it together but I heard a rumor while I was traveling about how Subaru Natsuki had ran away with a witch who put a spell on him!"

"I did *not* put a spell on him!" Emilia shouted.

Anri blinked. "Um. This might be a dumb question but why is he hiding way out here in the woods with you then?" She asked earnestly.

Emilia bowed her head and tried to focus on peeling potatoes. "He's here because... he loves me. He's here because... he wants to be with me..." Emilia said in an almost inaudible whisper.

"Wow," Anri said, sounding awestruck. "So Subaru really gave up like... *everything*, just to be with you?"

Emilia looked up at Anri, cut to the quick, but Anri was still peeling carrots with an expression of rapture on her face.

"That's *so* romantic!" Anri squeed. "A royal prince who gives up *everything* to be with the woman he loves, even with the entire world trying to tear them apart! All of his friends tell him he's being stupid but nothing can stop the power of true love and he's determined to stay with the woman he loves no matter where the road leads them or how difficult it gets!"

Anri shook her head, her broad smile never flickering. "That is *amazing*, Emilia! It's just like a romance novel. Wow. Actually, it's almost like I'm *in* one of those stories now. I wonder what roll I have? Maybe the sympathetic girlfriend who helps the heroine figure things out and then helps the pair escape and live happily ever after?!"

Emilia had no idea what Anri was talking about but she felt she had to say something. "I'd like that," Emilia murmured.

Anri kept talking animatedly but Emilia wasn't listening.

Subaru. You really did... give up everything... just to stay with me...

I'd never thought about it that way before. You gave up everything.

Why? Why would you do that...

"Wonderful soup tonight, Mili," Subaru said in an amused voice. "Tasted just like water with a few vegetables tossed in!"

Emilia sighed. "I'm sorry, Subaru. That was all we had."

Subaru looked at her in concern. "Mili, I was only kidding! Dinner was fine. We're still getting settled here. There's going to be a few bumps in the road. That's all."

Emilia just sighed.

Subaru and Emilia were cleaning up after dinner. Anri had gone to bed in to the other cottage and Emilia had given her another two logs to keep a fire burning tonight.

They finished drying the dishes and Emilia walked away. She sat down on the bed and stared down at the floor.

Subaru followed and sat down beside her. "Mili? You OK?"

Emilia shook her head and her eyes grew watery. "Subaru. What happened?"

"What do you mean?" He asked gently.

She shook her head. "I've lived in the Elio Forest all my life. This is *home*. I... We've gone through disaster after disaster ever since we left the Sanctuary. When we came back here, I thought that at least we were finally safe. But the people living just outside the forest want me dead and the mabeasts are stirred up and *something* powerful is stalking the woods and someone even walked into this very house while you were sleeping! I feel like we're surrounded by enemies. What are we going to do?!" Her voice rose to a shout.

Subaru looked at Emilia's frantic expression and gently guided her head to his shoulder and stroked her back.

Emilia sighed. "I thought that we could just disappear into the woods and let the world forget about us. I thought it would just be the two of us and the world could solve its own problems. It was such a beautiful dream..."

"It's not a dream, Mili," Subaru corrected gently. "But maybe not as simple as we thought."

"What do you mean?"

Subaru struggled to put his thoughts into words. "We can ignore the outside world but we can't expect the world to ignore us. The world is all around us! People are going to come into the forest periodically and we'll need a plan for how

to deal with them. The wide world is out there. We can fence ourselves in but we can't always fence it out."

"How would we do that?"

Subaru shrugged. "The forest is supposed to be haunted. And it is literally cursed-"

Emilia flinched.

Subaru sighed before continuing. "Maybe we can use the mabeasts that I... 'tamed' to frighten people away. The forest is huge! Hell, you grew up in this forest and you didn't even realize where we were for days!"

"Subaru!" Emilia protested. "That wasn't my fault! We were in a part of the forest that I almost never went to! One frozen tree looks very much like any other!"

Subaru grinned at her. "I'm not blaming you, Mili. I'm just making a point. You mapped the entire forest but you were still lost after Beatrice sent us here. I mean, it took you a whole five years to map the place-"

"Seven," She corrected.

"Seven," Subaru acknowledged. "But that means that we can still hide out in the forest. If *you* can get lost in here then anybody can! You'd need an army to search the place! It would take me days just to walk from one side of the forest to the other."

"Actually, Subaru," Emilia mused. "At the speed that you move in the snow, I think that it would take you closer to a week and a half."

Subaru shot her an annoyed look. "Thanks, Emilia," He said sarcastically. "It was very important that you clarified that point."

Emilia didn't respond, still looking downcast.

Subaru sighed. "Look, Mili, you need to try to calm down. This is a new situation for us."

Emilia looked at him in misery. "Subaru. This isn't supposed to be new! I've lived here all my life-"

"It's a new situation for *us*," Subaru emphasized. "Living with me isn't like living with Puck anymore than living with Puck was like living with Fortuna. And when we find the spirits that will be another adjustment. It's not all going to be perfect right away but we'll figure it out! It'll just take a little bit of time."

Emilia took a deep breath. "I don't know, Subaru..."

Subaru gently kissed her temple. "Those townspeople really spooked you tonight, didn't they?"

Emilia was quiet for a long time. "Subaru, they wanted to kill you..." She whispered in horror.

"Well, they'll need to get in line," Subaru grumbled. "There's quite a crowd in front of them. Capella, Regulus, some folks in Gusteko, Rem, and the entire Lagunican army!"

Emilia slammed her fist against the mattress. "Subaru! Can you please stop making jokes?! This is serious!"

Subaru wrapped his arms around her and held her close. "My point is that people wanting to kill us is nothing new. We can handle it. We're going to be OK, Mili. Even if our lives get really difficult, as long as we're together we can do anything!" He said soothingly.

"But, Subaru," Emilia whispered to herself. "What if us being together is the thing that's making your life so difficult?"

"What did you say, Mili?" Subaru asked.

Emilia took a deep breath. "Nothing, Subaru. Are you almost ready for bed? I'm feeling pretty tired."

Subaru was deep asleep but Emilia remained awake. Tired as she was, her mind wouldn't be still and her thoughts followed grim roads and dark paths.

All this time, I've been an utter fool. Ever since we left the Sanctuary, despite knowing that the entire world was out to get us, I never really worried about Subaru.

Reinhard would have killed me but I know that he would have died before he ever hurt Subaru. Felt is the same way. I'm sure that she'd do almost anything to protect him. I knew that if we were caught, my life would be forfeit but Subaru and the spirits would be well cared for. So I didn't have to worry.

But... that's just foolishness, isn't it... Those villagers had no idea who Subaru is and they didn't even care. To most people, Subaru is nothing more than another Witch Cultist following a witch around! Most people won't go out of their way to keep Subaru safe while they kill me. He'd be an acceptable casualty in killing a witch. Some people might even think that Subaru deserves to die as much as I do purely for being with me!

What can I do? Anri was right. Subaru really has given up everything just to be with me!

Emilia, you are a selfish little brat. You really have the gall to claim that you love Subaru? How could you ever let

anyone you love do this? How could you possibly justify letting him make such an enormous sacrifice solely for your benefit?

You're determined to keep Subaru with you no matter what. No matter what it costs him or how much it hurts him. You'll let him give up everything to be with you because you're so scared of losing him.

That isn't love, it's pure selfishness.

It's time, Emilia. It's time to grow up. It's time to stop letting your own weakness destroy the lives of everyone around you.

Oh, Subaru. This is all my fault. None of this ever would have happened to you if it weren't for me. Now you've lost everyone because of me. Everyone turned against you because of my magic. Worse, if there is some kind of strange monster in the forest, you might be in danger just staying here! Now you're a fugitive from the kingdom with no idea where your next meal is coming from. You've even lost Beatrice.

Subaru... I can only imagine how much you're hurting now. But there's one certain way for you to get Beatrice back.

It's... It's the only way. Reinhard and Felt will protect you so you'll never have to use your Authority again. Beatrice and Puck will be there to comfort you. It's the only way to make things right. It's the only way to give you the life that you deserve.

Oh, Subaru. You're in so much pain. I know your heart so well that it's as if I can feel it breaking every day since you've lost your family. This is all my fault. I need to make this right. I need to do what's best for you, Subaru and not myself. I love so much, Subaru. If it's for you, I know that I could bear any sacrifice. Even if I wonder if it will kill me to even say it out loud...

Emilia buried her face in the pillow beside him and wept.

When Subaru woke up he found Emilia was already awake and sitting at the table. She had her hands clasped tightly together and she stared down at the table with a bleak expression.

Oh no. Mili is still upset from last night...

I need to find a way to cheer her up...

"Good morning, Mili," Subaru said, trying to sound chipper while pulling his clothes on.

"...Morning, Subaru," Emilia whispered.

He clapped his hands together. "Well, it's a brand new day full of possibilities. It's time to start pulling our lives back together. I think I'll grab Anri and bring her to Iruk. That's one less mouth to feed anyway. While I'm there, I'm going to buy some food."

Emilia didn't answer.

Subaru hesitated. "Mili, I know that you don't want to hear this but I think... maybe you should stay here. It's just safer that way," He said in a placating tone. "I won't be gone too long and the villagers at Iruk are less likely to react badly to me."

Emilia sighed and bowed her head.

Subaru's face grew careworn. "Mili, I know that this is hard for you but I'll be alright without you on this trip. And trust me, you'll feel so much better once you have a full stomach. I'll drop off Anri and bring back food and we'll have a feast tonight. Once we're rested and full, then we can regroup and figure out a plan to get the spirits back!"

Emilia didn't respond right away. "You really miss the spirits, don't you, Subaru?" Emilia asked sympathetically.

"Of course, I do!" Subaru said simply. "I miss having Puck around. I miss reading to Beatrice every night." Subaru shook his head and chuckled. "You know, it's funny. I can't even *remember* the last time I walked any serious distance without Beatrice on my shoulder. It feels flat out weird not to have her here! I feel... off balance..." Subaru said, the forced good humor in his voice becoming sad and wistful.

Emilia bowed her head.

Subaru cleared his throat. "Which is why today is the beginning of Operation 'Get the Spirits Back!' As soon as I'm back from Iruk, we are going to eat a huge meal and then we are going to brainstorm how to rescue Puck and Beatrice!"

Emilia stared at Subaru expressionlessly. *Oh, Subaru. I should never have left this place. I should never have listened to Roswaal's lies. Now I've lost Puck and I've even dragged you into my own mess. Your friends have turned against you and even the Kingdom thinks that you might be an enemy. It was one thing when everyone wanted to just kill me but now I'm putting you in danger as well. People will see you with me and think that you're a Witch Cultist. I can't let this happen. I can't ruin your life anymore than I already have. You deserve so much better than this. I need to make this right. There's only one thing I can do.*

"Um, Emilia?" Subaru said, becoming uncomfortable.

"Subaru, I have an idea for how to get the spirits back but... I don't think that you're going to like it," Emilia said slowly.

"OK. That doesn't sound promising," Subaru muttered, folding his arms across his chest.

"Just... promise me that you'll try to keep an open mind, please?" Emilia pleaded.

Subaru took a deep breath, "What is it, Mili?"

Emilia closed her eyes, "I think... I think maybe you should go."

Subaru squinted at her, "Go? Go where?"

"Go home," Emilia said.

"Emilia, I have *no* idea how to get back to my world," Subaru said incredulously, "And why would I want to?"

"No! I mean... go back to the capitol. To the manor. Find Puck and Beatrice. They need you."

Subaru stared at her, "And just what are *you* going to be doing while I go off on this daring rescue mission?"

"Subaru, it won't be a 'rescue' as long as I'm not with you! Just tell them that you got away from the 'evil witch' and Reinhard and Felt will forget the whole thing. They'll put Puck and Beatrice right back in your arms," Emilia pointed out.

"And then what?" Subaru scoffed, "I just walk away, say 'We'll be back in five minutes,' and then march all the way back to Elinor without anyone noticing? They're going to be watching me like a hawk after all this. If I told them that I just miraculously 'got away' then everyone would be worried that I was some kind of sleeper agent sent back to cause trouble. I'd never be able to sneak off."

Emilia bit her lip, "I know. I was thinking that... you shouldn't come back."

Subaru stared at Emilia, "...What?" He whispered in horror.

"I don't like it either," Emilia said.

"My feelings for this 'plan' of yours go a little bit further than 'not liking' it, Mili!" He snapped.

Emilia took a deep breath, "Subaru, I need you to stop and think about this."

"Think about what?! That I'd be leaving you? That this would be 'goodbye, see you never?!' What the hell would make me want to follow this plan?"

"Beatrice!" Emilia snapped.

Subaru paused.

"You promised her that you'd be together forever," Emilia reminded him, "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I made you the same promise if you recall," Subaru retorted.

"You did not," Emilia said calmly.

"I asked you to fucking marry me, Emilia! What does marriage mean to you? Hell, what do *I* mean to you?!" Subaru demanded.

"You mean everything to me," Emilia whispered.

"But you want to send me away," Subaru scoffed.

"Subaru! What kind of life could you possibly have here?" She demanded, "You're trapped in the forest hiding from the kingdom with me! What would you do here? Grow turnips?"

"I'm guessing that if I was waiting for the growing season, I'd be waiting for a very long time," He admitted, "But the same question applies to you! What are you going to do every day? Map the forest? Dust the ice statues?"

"I've lived here before."

"Well, I can start living here right now!" Subaru replied.

"What about Beatrice?" Emilia asked.

"What about Puck?" Subaru retorted, "Are you really OK with never seeing him again?"

Emilia took a deep, ragged breath, "Puck doesn't even remember me. All his love has been given to you. So I want you to promise me that you'll love him and cherish him the same way that I would."

"Or, and I know this sounds crazy but just hear me out, why don't I just bring Puck and Beatrice back here and we'll cherish them together!"

"How, Subaru? You just admitted that you couldn't do that!" Emilia reminded him.

"I can't do it if I try waltzing back to Felt and Reinhard saying: 'Let's all just forget about Emilia!'" Subaru said

sarcastically, "That's a terrible plan. We'll need to sneak the spirits out!"

"Subaru, even if you could, what about everyone else?"

"Everyone else? Who? Who else are we responsible for?" Subaru asked.

"Felt, for starters."

"*Felt?! Emilia, I feel absolutely no responsibility for Felt at the moment! She's the one who talked Reinhard into tracking us down and trying to kill you, in case you forgot!*" Subaru spat.

"And that... was a bad mistake," Emilia admitted.

"A *mistake?!"* Subaru said incredulously.

"Fine. What about Petra?"

"Petra? What the hell is threatening Petra right now?"

"Subaru, you know that some winters she doesn't have enough to eat," Emilia reminded him.

Subaru stared at her, "What the fuck, Emilia?! We introduced crop rotations at Arlem for a reason. Next winter they will have so much food!"

"But what about all the other Petras in all the villages across the kingdom who don't have that knowledge?"

"What about me, Emilia?! Why are you looking for excuses to get rid of me?!" Subaru yelled.

"I'm not!"

"You must certainly fucking are!" Subaru snapped. "What is this? Now that I can't get the dragon blood for you, you just don't want me around anymore?!"

Emilia looked as if Subaru had just slapped her, "That is absolutely unfair, Subaru! You're just projecting your own insecurities on me now!"

"Oh yeah? Then why are you so determined to make me leave?!" Subaru demanded.

"Subaru! Because of all the good that you could do! You could make millions of peoples' lives better all over the world if you went back to the capitol and won the royal selection! You could take care of Beatrice and Puck and make sure they felt loved everyday! You could make sure everyone in the kingdom had good food and warm clothing. You could even end the fighting between humans and demi-humans!"

"And what about us?!" Subaru demanded.

Emilia took a deep breath, "Subaru. I love you. I love you with all my heart. But I'm just one person who would be happier if you stayed here compared with millions who would be happier if you left. *You* would be much happier if you left. We need to think about the big picture."

"I would *miserable* away from you! I've already tested that theory! Also, fuck the big picture!"

Emilia shook her head sadly, "I really hoped that you would be more mature than this."

"Mature? Seriously?!" Subaru sneered, "You want to talk about maturity? Emilia, this is you trying to *buy* your way out of your own guilt. Again."

Emilia gasped. "And just what exactly do you mean by that?!" She demanded.

"Emilia, you're doing what you always do! You have a martyr complex! You're trying to work your way out of your own guilt by suffering. Ever since the disaster in the forest, everything you've done has been with the single goal of making up for your big mistake."

"This has nothing to do with that!" Emilia yelled, her face flushed with anger.

"Of course it does! If I stayed here with you, you'd be happy and you think that you don't deserve to be happy so you had better send me away," Subaru said sarcastically. "That way you can be all alone and miserable. Good thing that Puck's memories got erased because you know that he'd never abandon you otherwise!"

Emilia stared at him, her jaw hanging open, "How *dare* you?!" She yelled.

"I really thought that you were starting to get over this!" Subaru shouted back.

"*Get over it?!"* Emilia screamed, bolting up. "Are you really *that* dense? I entombed hundreds of people in solid ice! You don't just 'get over' that! I have an obligation-"

"To *help* them! Not to be miserable! You really think that your suffering makes them feel *any* better? If those people are still conscious in any way, they're not sitting around hoping that Emilia feels guilty enough or that she's torturing herself enough. If they're watching, all they want is not to have been turned to ice. *They're* the ones that are hurting and your pain doesn't decrease theirs in any way. It *isn't* about you!"

"That's rich coming from you!" Emilia screamed, her cheeks bright scarlet, "To you, *everything* is about us! You don't care what happens to *anyone* else as long as we can be together!"

"I *will* rescue Beatrice and Puck!" He shouted back.

"And that's it?! You don't care what happens to *anyone* else as long as your personal family is safe?!"

"I never claimed to be a hero, Emilia!" He yelled.

"You were *my* hero!" She screamed in his face.

"Well, Emilia, I'm sorry that I finally let you down by being a goddamn human being and not some fucking perfect effigy in a story book!"

"Get out of here!" Emilia shrieked.

"Gladly!" Subaru yelled, grabbing his satchel as he marched out the door.

Subaru slammed it shut behind him.

Emilia's eyes widened and her face became stricken. She raised a hand helplessly as if to call him back.

***Chapter 17*: Chapter 17**

Subaru fought his way through knee-deep snowdrifts, a freezing cold wind howling at his back. Angry black clouds boiled overhead but Subaru dealt with nothing but flurries.

He'd walked through Emilia's village without really seeing it. Subaru had been walking through the frigid, silent woods for well over a mile fueled by sheer resentment.

She told me to leave. After everything that we've been through together, she fucking told me to leave! I almost started to believe that Emilia wouldn't eventually say that we were just a mistake and that we should break up but then she told me to-

Subaru shook his head violently, trying to shake off the poisonous thoughts.

She wants to get rid of me... She wants me gone...

A cold voice whispered to Subaru from the depths of his mind. *It's not really a surprise. You always knew this would happen eventually. She's started to see you as you really are. Not as a hero or a genius but simply as an inept bumbler who briefly had a lucky streak. The dragon blood is gone. You can't save the forest for Emilia. You can't make everyone remember her. You have nothing to offer her. In fact, you're doing nothing but putting her in danger. Normally, rumors of a witch hiding in a forest would be beneath Reinhard's notice but do you think that he'll ever get tired of hunting the woman he blames for his friend's bewitchment? He'll hunt Emilia down and-*

"Fuck" He roared, triggering *Indomitable* and smashing his fist into a nearby tree.

The trees in the forest were practically ice sculptures themselves and his punch shattered the tree into billions of tiny snow particles.

Subaru grabbed at his hair as if to rip it out. "All I wanted to do was to keep my family safe! Is that really so much to ask?!" He howled.

Subaru crouched down in the snow and buried his face in his hands. "Oh my God, I suck. Beako, I promised you that we'd be together forever. I lost you after less than a month!"

Come on, Subaru! Pull yourself back together! Beako needs you! This isn't the time to be feeling sorry for yourself. This is the time to come up with a plan to get her back!

Subaru stood up and took several deep breaths.

"OK. One step at time. That's how I'll do it. I will get Beatrice back!" Subaru promised. He took a deep breath, "I need a plan."

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

The snowflakes blowing across the snowdrifts slowed down briefly and then the wind sped up and they all blew away.

Subaru coughed and spat out a mouthful of black crud that tasted like ashes.

Fuck! What's wrong with my power?!

The cold voice whispered, *In all candor, Reason and Judgment wouldn't help you very much right now. Your intelligence may surge in that mode but this alone will not solve your problem. Your issue is not lack of intelligence but rather lack of information. You can not concoct a plan to rescue Beatrice because you have no idea where she is. This is the most important piece of information to acquire. Unfortunately, it will almost certainly be the most difficult.*

The place where Beatrice and Puck are being held wouldn't be bandied about in casual conversation in some bar.

Nobody else would care enough about the information to even pass it on. Beyond that, their location might even be classified. They might be considered enemies of the kingdom because of their association with a suspected witch. The kingdom might even-

Subaru's fear and fury rose up to engulf him like some great wave. *No! That is not what happened! Felt and Reinhard won't blame the spirits for what Emilia and I did! They'll make sure that they're well taken care of.*

The cold voice continued. *This is always assuming that Reinhard and Felt actually have custody of the spirits. Crusch might have ordered them to be turned over to her or to the sage's council. Either one is likely to be much less kind to the spirits, both in general and in extracting any useful information...*

Subaru's face contorted in horror. "Fuck!" He screamed. He fell to his knees in the deep snow, burying his face in his hands and crying helplessly.

Emilia sat in the cottage, her face buried in her hands. *What have I done?! I didn't mean... Subaru! All I wanted was for you to be happy! Why can't you understand?! I love you so much that I can't bear to have you with me because all I do is hurt you! I hate having to see you in pain!*

What sort of life could you have here?! A fugitive, hiding away in a cursed forest? Subaru, you could be a King! You could spend every day surrounded by people who love you and think that you're a hero! How could I possibly let you spend the rest of your life in hiding with me? What's even worse is, I know that you're kind enough to throw away everything in your life just for my sake but I can't let you do that! I can't let myself be that selfish!

It's become clear to me that I'm the one who's putting you in danger. Anyone who sees us together will think that you're a Witch Cultist! They won't look at you and see a wonderful person who should be loved and admired by the whole world, they see someone that they think deserves to die! All I can do is put you in danger. Your life would be ten times harder just because I was in it! That is why you need to leave me!

Emilia swallowed hard and looked around the tiny cottage. Somehow, now that Subaru had left, the small house felt even smaller. A set of four walls that now contained the shattered remnants of her meaningless life.

She buried her face in her hands with a wail of despair.

Subaru marched north. He knew that it was irrational to just walk through the forest at random but he wasn't sure what else to do. He wasn't ready to go back to Emilia just yet.

Fuck me. What the hell was I doing, talking to Emilia like that? I'm a fucking asshole. I took all of my frustrations out on her just because... she suggested that we separate.

Subaru stopped and took a deep breath. The chill wind whistled through the empty forest. Subaru was suddenly struck by the loneliness of the place.

He shook his head and kept walking.

Alright, look: I'll freely admit that I completely overreacted and that what I said to her was... seriously not OK but why would she ever tell me something like that? Doesn't she know how much the very idea of never seeing her again kills me?

I'm not lying. I'd rather die at Emilia's side than go on living without her.

I know that Beatrice and Puck need me, need both of us. I get that. But... I'm not going to trade Emilia for them. I can't do it. I won't do it.

The clouds overhead boiled angrily, threatening a violent storm but Subaru only dealt with flurries as he wandered the forest trails.

OK. It's time that I finally faced reality. I've lost all of my friends, most of my family has been captured, and my fiancée is a suspected witch who will be killed on sight. The only thing I've got left to work with is my Authority.

Fuck. All I ever had to work with was my Authority. That's why Beatrice chose me, why Reinhard and Felt followed me, and... it's probably why Emilia fell in love with me...

Fuck me. I almost wish that there was a cliff handy that I could throw myself off of...

Alright, whatever. OK, so there's absolutely nothing good or admirable about me except for my witchcraft... which actually kind of means that there's nothing good about me whatsoever.

...God, I suck.

Subaru left the trees and began walking across a wide meadow.

Come on! Knock it off! You have the Authority of Pride! The strongest Authority imaginable and you need to master it! That is the only way to get Beatrice and Puck back and it's the only way that you can keep Emilia safe. You are going to master the Authority, period.

Yeah but how? And is the Authority even working anymore? Reason and Judgment seems... jammed. I keep throwing up when I try to harness the power. I can still use Indomitable and Pridebreaker but what's wrong with Reason and

Judgment? Am I overusing the Authority? How do I make it stronger?

Beatrice told me that the Authority would get stronger as I gave into my pride. Sounds simple enough. The only problem with that plan is that I am Subaru Natsuki, the most worthless, pathetic waste of space on two different worlds. I let Beatrice and Puck get kidnapped, my fiancée has been cursed, my friends all turned against me, and the entire world is hunting me down.

Jeez, Roswaal even flat out told me that the Authority seeks out the most pathetic people that it can find. The Authority must be really satisfied with how things have worked out so far. Selecting pathetic people seems a little counterproductive for Pride but I guess I just still don't understand how magic works.

Subaru, still deep in thought, found himself climbing a tall hill in the middle of the meadow.

God, I keep acting like something brought me to this world for a reason. Maybe I've got this whole thing backwards. Maybe the Earth was just so embarrassed to have me around that it flung me somewhere and didn't give a shit where I wound up as long as it was far away. Maybe I should just be grateful that this planet even has oxygen.

Subaru reached the top of the hill and saw something out of the corner of his eyes. He looked up and saw the hill was covered in crude snowmen, dozens and dozens of snowmen.

Huh? Do little kids come way out here to play? Why would they?

Subaru examined one snow man more closely and noticed that there was ice under the coating of snow. Subaru delicately brushed the snow away revealing the figure of a woman with pointed ears. Her clothes and terrified expression were captured in perfect relief in the ice.

"Holy shit," Subaru whispered, looking around in shock, "This must be... where it happened..."

Emilia sat at the table, staring at the wall. She found that she had no interest in moving, eating or sleeping.

She just sat there.

"I did only what was best for him," Emilia murmured to herself in a dead voice. "That's all that that matters. Nobody in this world even remembers me. Nobody cares about me. What happens to me doesn't matter. I need to be thinking about Subaru. Subaru deserves the world. Now that I'm no longer holding him back, he can have a happy, wonderful life. I should be happy for him. I will be happy for him."

She heard a faint knock on the door.

Emilia's heart leaped into her throat. "Subaru?" She breathed. She took a deep breath. "Come in!"

The door opened a crack and Emilia's face fell.

"Good morning!" Anri said cheerfully. "Are you guys ready to go?"

"Go?" Emilia asked in confusion.

Anri looked awkward. "You know, to Iruk?" Anri reminded her. "I already fed and saddled Patrasche and everything! We can head out any time," She hinted.

"Is Patrasche still here?" Emilia asked sharply.

Anri frowned in confusion. "Well, yeah, why wouldn't she be? She's right here," Anri replied, opening the cottage door a little wider and revealing the riding dragon standing just outside.

If Subaru didn't take Patrasche then he hasn't left the forest! He'll never get out of the forest on foot! Maybe that means that he'll... come back?

Or was he just too angry to think straight when he left and when he calms down, he'll come back for Patrasche and then leave me alone forever?

...He wouldn't even need to see me. He could just take the dragon and leave. I'd walk outside, find that Patrasche is gone, and realize that Subaru has left and that he's never coming back...

...Which is good. This is what I want, remember? It means that Subaru will be happy and safe.

I need to stop being so selfish...

"Where's Subaru?" Anri asked, stepping inside the cottage and closing the door behind her.

Emilia bit her lip and her face fell.

Subaru was surrounded by dozens and dozens of ice statues. He knew that they must all have been Emilia's friends and family.

God. I knew that this happened in the forest but... somehow I never really thought that I might end up here. I never imagined that I'd be out walking and just run into all the ice statues that Emilia made the people of the forest into.

The statues were frozen in poses of frantic flight. Their faces were contorted in fear. Many looked behind them, clearly terrified of whatever had been chasing them.

Shit. It's no wonder that Emilia is so desperate to help them. She once told me that she came out here every day to clean them off. I guess they all look like snowmen because of the daily snowfall in the forest coupled with a few months of nobody tending to them.

Subaru bit his lip. He rummaged around in his satchel and pulled out Petra's handkerchief. He cleaned off most of the snow with his bare hands and then used the handkerchief to remove the finer bits.

I doubt that the elves care if their bodies are covered in snow. Hell, I doubt that they're even aware of it but... I don't know what else to do here. Besides, maybe Emilia will appreciate my efforts if she comes out this way.

...Or maybe she'll just be mad that I was sneaking around the forest and looking into her affairs...

Subaru kept brushing the snow off the statues. Each face was different but they were all terrified.

With every statue I clean off, I feel like I'm uncovering the scene of some ancient tragedy. Or the evidence of a crime scene. All of these statues used to be people. They used to be Emilia's friends and family.

It took hours but Subaru cleaned off all of the ice statues. He noticed a strange frozen blob near the middle of the assembled statues that had been partially melted.

That must have been where Puck thawed Emilia out of the ice.

Subaru looked around at the frozen elves. He was surrounded by dozens, hundreds of frozen bodies like the world's strangest cemetery. The weight of Emilia's guilt and self-loathing hit him like a truck.

Their faces are the real killer. These people were terrified and running for their lives before Emilia cursed them. Their faces are all contorted in fear. They're panicking but they're still all running away together. No one is breaking away from the group or trying to save themselves at someone else's expense. I can see lovers holding hands, families desperately trying to help the younger kids keep up. The elderly and infirm being carried on the backs of the young and strong. These were good people.

And all of their lives were cut short by Emilia's curse.

Subaru shook his head.

Emilia came here everyday to keep them free of snow and to confront her own mistake.

Fuck me. I told Emilia that she had to get over her guilt. Now that I'm actually standing here, I'm amazed that she isn't suicidal. I probably would be. Of course she's desperate to save them. Who wouldn't be? But now that the dragon blood is all gone, we have only one hope for saving them: the Authority of Pride.

Subaru brushed the bits of snow off of Petra's handkerchief and put it back in the satchel. The frozen elves standing around him were at least free from snow now.

He sighed. "Maybe it's time that I finally go back to Emilia and begged for forgiveness," He murmured to himself, slinking down the enormous hill.

Subaru kept moving at a brisk pace trying to make for Emilia's cottage. He'd been out here for hours. The sun was already starting to descend and the cold was deepening. His thoughts about Emilia's unspeakable burden and what the kingdom might do to Beatrice and Puck kept racing through his mind, despite how hard he tried to suppress them.

He just needed to keep moving. He felt like if he ever stopped moving, his despair would catch up with him and he'd be unable to move at all.

"Emilia," Anri asked in disbelief. "Why the hell would you *do* that?!"

Emilia didn't answer.

Anri shook her head. "Come on, Mili! You know that this isn't what you *really* want!"

Emilia sighed. "I'm afraid that this is bigger than what I want, Anri. Since the day that we met, Subaru has ignored his own interests. He's done nothing but think about me and how to make me happy. How long can I possibly let him keep doing all of this? Could I really just let him waste his entire life on me?"

Anri looked skeptical. "If you asked him, do you think that *he'd* say a life spent with you would be a 'waste?'"

Emilia sighed and bowed her head. "Anri, if you could be a King, if you could spend your days surrounded by people who admire and adore you, would you really be willing to hide in a forest for the rest of your life with some loathsome witch?"

Anri gave Emilia a steady gaze. "Couple of things, Mili. First of all, you're *not* a witch. Very important point. Secondly, and you can take my word for this, power and prestige are *seriously* overrated. And as far as I can tell, if he stayed with you, Subaru *would* be spending his life with someone who admires and adores him. Why would that be a mistake?"

Emilia sighed and wrapped her arms around her chest as if she was trying to hold herself together. "I'm just... I'm just

worried that one day he'll wake up some morning and realize that... we were just a huge mistake..."

Anri thought about it. "I suppose in the end, *all* marriages are mistakes," She admitted. "At least in the sense that a more suitable partner could have *theoretically* been found. But it's the people who willingly stand by us, who *choose* to endure whatever life throws at us, who are our true soul mates."

Emilia was crying. "That's... that's very wise, Anri," She sniffed. "It sounds like something that Subaru would say."

Anri gave Emilia half a smile. "Well, I can't really take any credit for it, Mili. It's a quote from one of my favorite romance novels," She chuckled.

Before Emilia could respond she heard a thunderous noise echo across the forest. A great rumbling cry, less a roar than a strangled cough that rattled the rafters and then faded in the distance.

Emilia looked at Anri in shock.

Anri looked terrified. "Um. Whatever made that noise, I *don't* think that I want to meet it."

Subaru froze in his tracks as he was walking in the forest. The thunderous sound shook the trees like a great wind.

"Emilia!" He whispered and then took off for the village at a run.

"Where are we going?!" Anri screamed, desperately trying to keep up with Emilia who raced through the forest, following Subaru's tracks in the deep snow. "What was that thing?!"

The pair sprinted across a small meadow.

Emilia, for her part, was utterly indifferent to if Anri followed her or not. Emilia's thoughts were fixated on one thing: *Subaru. Got to find Subaru!*

What could have made that noise? Whatever it was must be enormous! I would have guessed the White Whale but Subaru and Reinhard killed it. Could it...

Could it be the Black Snake?

Oh Gods. Please, not again!

"Emilia!" Subaru shouted as he ran out of the trees.

"Subaru!" She shouted, grabbing him in her arms.

"Are you alright?" He demanded.

She nodded. "I'm fine! Subaru, are you-"

"I'm alright. Emilia, what the hell was that?!"

"I don't know!"

"Um," Anri muttered, startling both of them as they had forgotten that she was even there. "What is... that?"

Emilia and Subaru both turned where she pointed. There was a massive Guiltylowe standing in the trees on a small hill.

Then he realized that the Guiltylowe was backing away and snarling at something else.

Subaru looked past the Guiltylowe and saw that something was moving through the forest. A vast, creeping pool of viscous black sludge was flowing *up* the hill toward the mabeast.

The Guiltylowe stood its ground and roared at the oozing muck. The beast raised one great paw and smashed the sludge. This had no more effect than stomping on a mud puddle.

The creeping muck, suddenly quick as a striking snake, formed long strings and enveloped the beast's paw, then flowed up and over the thrashing mabeast.

The Guiltylowe tried to leap away but it couldn't break free, struggling against the strangling, black tendrils of sludge that were crawling all over its body as if the beast were being buried in black spiderwebs.

The blob's tendrils were like clutching fingers as they pulled the pool of sludge up and over the beast's body and engulfed the Guiltylowe. The muck piled more and more of itself onto the struggling mabeast and then contracted until every muscle and sinew of the beast was starkly outlined under the black murk. The Guiltylowe's roar of pain trailed off into a gurgling wheeze.

Then the blob suddenly collapsed in on itself, falling back to the earth and becoming a flat puddle once again.

The sludge began to flow away. There was no sign left of the Guiltylowe except for tiny scraps of fur and a few small bones.

"Emilia," Subaru said as he and Emilia clung to each other trembling. "What the hell *is* that thing?!"

"I don't know!" Emilia whispered, her face white.

"It's the Black Water!" Anri gasped.

They both looked at the girl whose face was contorted in horror. "I've read about it in books!" She said in a strangled whisper. "When the Black Snake roams the world, sometimes it leaves behind pools of its venom. Its venom is alive and has the same desire to kill as its creator. The Black Water is much more deadly in Gusteko than in the other nations because of the cold. The Black Water can lay dormant in frozen lakes for years or even decades before a break in the ice frees it."

"Frozen lake?" Subaru whispered to himself.

Oh no. What the fuck did I do now?!

"I don't think that it sees us," Emilia whispered.

"I'm not sure that it even has eyes!" Subaru hissed. He watched it. "At least it's... flowing away from us."

"We need to get the hell out of here!" Anri breathed in a shrill voice. "We have no chance against this monster! Absolutely none! The Holy King would immediately send out all of his Acolyte Knights if the Black Water was spotted! We need to get out of here and sound the alarm!"

"You don't need to tell me twice," Subaru muttered. "At least it's not heading toward the village."

Emilia nodded but then she stiffened. "Oh, Gods! It's headed right toward the hill of the villagers!" She screamed out loud.

Emilia tore herself free of Subaru's arms and raced after the monster.

"Emilia!" He screamed, racing after her but Emilia easily outpaced him.

"No!" Anri screamed. "You can't! There's no way that you can fight that thing!"

Emilia raced toward the monster. Her mind was blank. Her only thought was to protect the helpless villagers that stood frozen on top of the hill.

I can't let it reach them! If this monster devours the villagers then there is no hope, no hope at all! I have to protect them!

The Black Water slowly inched up the hill with the villagers' statues at its summit.

Emilia flew toward the hill and scrambled up after the Black Water. Emilia reached deep down into herself, summoning all the magic that she could muster and flung a wave of absolute cold at the beast.

Emilia panted for breath as the magic, like a vast pale blue wind, tore after the monster. In the magic's wake, the snow on the ground froze to solid ice which then cracked and shattered from the sheer cold.

The magic struck the monster full on. The creature twisted and boiled, making a thunderous 'coughing' sound. The flat puddle grew long tentacles of sludge that rolled and writhed until the creature resembled a gnarled, black thorn bush of immense proportions.

The monster's black skin began to grow patches of white frost that steadily crept along its body. The beast slowed its thrashing, its tendrils growing stiff under the spreading frost.

The magic began to crystallize the monster. More and more of it froze solid until the Black Water was nothing but a twisted, eldritch ice statue of flailing tentacles the size of a house.

Emilia fell forward onto her hands and knees, gasping for breath.

I don't think that I've ever used that much magic in my entire life...

It's all that I can do not to pass out just from kneeling here.

But my people are safe. That's what's important. Now I can go home and rest to my heart's content.

She heard Subaru racing up behind her.

"Mili! Are you OK?"

She nodded, having no breath to speak as Subaru knelt down beside her and put his arms around her.

Subaru stared in amazement at the enormous ice sculpture that looked like a forest of brier shrubs.

He shook his head. "Mili, let's get you home," He whispered.

There was a rumbling sound. Subaru and Emilia both looked up in horror as the frozen Black Water shivered. Fissures spread up and down its frozen tentacles as the ice began to crack. The Black Water squirmed and shuddered. The frozen statue trembled.

Then the Black Water shattered its bonds.

The nightmarish creature rose up before them like a standing wave, twenty feet tall. It grew gnashing tendrils in profusion from its inky black body.

The beast's whip like tentacles lashed out at Emilia and Subaru threw himself in front of her.

A tendril, blacker than pitch wrapped around his arm.

Subaru's mind screamed in agony. He had triggered *Indomitable* a second too late. He look down at his arm and nearly passed out. Between the places where the monster's tentacle had wrapped around his forearm, his limb looked like meat that had been dunked into a deep fat fryer. The skin had turned a yellowy brown and his flesh steamed where the monster had grabbed it. It looked like the skin was dissolving and the muscles underneath were starting to come loose off the bone.

Subaru desperately shoved Emilia away from the creature and she went skidding across the snow. Anri raced to her side.

Subaru gave the monster an *Indomitable* punch but it felt like punching Jello. The monster quivered a bit but the force just flowed through the beast and his blow did no damage.

This thing's grip is like iron! I can't break loose! I can't even trigger Reason and Judgment! Indomitable is preventing that thing from dissolving my arm but once it times out my body is going to melt like butter on a skillet!

I can't even punch the thing! It's a gelatin!

Five seconds.

What the hell do I do?! I need to save Emilia but she's too tired to run right now and all of her magic is used up!

Four seconds.

I need the real power! The kind that manifested at the slaver camp! But how do I do it? What triggered it?!

Three seconds.

Pride. I need to harness my Pride. Give me the power! It's mine! I deserve it! I need it. I want it! Give it to me!

Two seconds.

Let's make a deal! I'll give you whatever you want just help me! Help me save Emilia!

One second.

Subaru's mind began to thrash in desperation. *I'm not going to let everything end this way! This is my story! Mine! I'm not going to die in these accursed woods! I am going to protect Emilia and rescue Beatrice. And God help anyone who gets in my way! This sludge has threatened my wife and I'm going to show it what a terrible decision that was!*

Indomitable timed out and Subaru tried to sustain it on pure will. But instead of the heart-squeezing pain that he usually felt, this time he felt a terrible tearing sensation deep within his chest, as if something inside of him had ripped wide open or ruptured.

Then the power started to flow and Subaru stopped worrying about it.

"*Pridebreaker*," He whispered.

"Subaru!" Emilia screamed. She tried to get to her feet but her knees buckled under her.

The Black Water engulfed Subaru like a breaking wave, burying him under gnashing tentacles and thick black sludge.

"No!" She screamed, reaching for her magic but she was well and truly drained. She tried to crawl forward but Anri grabbed her shoulders and held her back.

There was a thunderous detonation that shook the earth.

Emilia and Anri were both thrown backwards by the force and the Black Water exploded out into a great dome thirty feet across. The previously opaque black sludge now looked filmy and translucent, as if the monster had been stretched to its very limits.

The monster staggered, slowly unpeeling itself from around its prey. Then it collapsed to the ground stunned, like a starfish that had been flung up on the beach, its huge tendrils sprawling in every direction, wisps of steam were rising from its body.

Emilia looked feverishly for some sign of Subaru but she was forced to avert her gaze as a great gush of steam struck her eyes when the monster withdrew itself from around him. The heat billowing out from under the Black Water's dome melted the snow for yards around it.

Emilia looked up and her jaw dropped. Subaru stood there calmly, one tendril still clutching his arm, but he had changed.

When Subaru had been at the slaver camp, Emilia had been too far away to sense him. She hadn't understood what the spirits had been so concerned about.

She understood now.

Looking at Subaru was like looking at the sun. The power radiating off him was enough to make Emilia want to shield her eyes, instinctively knowing that her frail body was never designed to stand this close to such power and that it could reduce her to ashes without effort or even ever noticing her presence.

Mana poured out of Subaru like heat flowed from a bonfire but this mana was strange and unnatural. Emilia sensed the spirits, the forest, and indeed the whole world recoil from it.

"You dare?" Subaru asked the Black Water quietly.

The Black Water reverted from a thick sludge to a more viscous liquid and began to flow away.

The monster made it less than a yard before it jerked to a halt.

Emilia realized that, despite being a liquid, Subaru had somehow managed to *grab* the creature by its tendril and was holding it fast.

"Filthy wretch," Subaru murmured. "Misbegotten by accident and toil. You dare to challenge me?"

The creature fought to get free, flowing away, stretching itself into a long slender rope but it could not seem to shake off Subaru's grip.

"You are a mindless abomination," Subaru said, sounding as if he'd found a cockroach in his cupboard. "A beast bereft of heart or mind. Pathetic wretch. I am the principal aspect of this world and in your unthinking assault against me you have dared to lay hands upon the world itself. Did you think that I would ignore your trespass? Think you that, because the winter storm lacks agency, its offenses against me should go unacknowledged? Madness! Be you agent or be you principle I know the terrible malice that animates you! Think not that clemency nor mercy shall be afforded to you for your presumption, you lifeless thing! I would strike the sun if she offended me!"

In desperation, the Black Water turned and fought. It attempted to envelope Subaru again but its withering tentacles... slowed.

The creature rose up and tried to engulf Subaru but it was moving as if in slow motion.

Steam was pouring from every inch of the creature's body. Water was dripping from every tentacle as if the monster was sweating from unimaginable heat. The tentacles were shrinking, growing stiff as its sludgy body dried out.

"Fie on you, you filthy, aborted thing," He whispered. "This world has been given into my hand. I am the rightful master of all that I survey and it is by right and by duty that I shall impose my order on this realm." Subaru shook his head in contempt.

The monster's entire body was shrinking. It's coloring was steadily growing darker and more opaque as the Black Water concealed and curdled.

It's tentacles were shrinking, retracting, becoming nothing but stiff stubs.

The waves of steam were thinning and the water flowing out of the monster diminished to a slow trickle.

The creature finally stopped moving. It looked like a stiff, gnarled thorn bush.

Subaru gave it a look of deep contempt for a long moment.

Then he punched the desiccated corpse.

It shattered into dust.

Emilia stared at Subaru with her jaw hanging open.

Emilia jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

It was Anri.

"Emilia! What the hell just happened here?" Anri whispered in disbelief as she helped Emilia climb to her feet. "I've never seen magic like that. I've never even *heard* of magic this strong! What was that?! Yin magic?"

Emilia turned to Anri, her mind racing for plausible explanations for Subaru's power. "Yes!" She agreed immediately. "Subaru is an extremely powerful wielder of Yin magic. He was even contracted to the Great Spirit of Yin!" She said proudly.

"Wow!" Anri breathed.

"Emilia," A voice croaked.

Emilia turned back to Subaru and saw his eyes roll up in his head. Subaru collapsed limply into the half melted slush.

"Subaru!" Emilia screamed, staggering over to him.

She fell to her knees in front of him and gathered his limp body onto her lap.

Subaru moaned, shaking his head. Emilia stared down at his arm in horror.

Emilia could sense the vicious curse that the beast's touch had imposed. The skin on Subaru's left forearm was bubbling like bacon grease over a hot fire. The bubbles popped and left open sores and painful looking lesions in their wake.

"Subaru!" Emilia screamed.

Subaru moaned. "Emilia," He whimpered with his eyes closed. He seemed barely conscious.

Emilia spun around to stare at Anri. "Anri! You said that you were a healer! Please, can you help Subaru?! There has to be an antidote for this poison, right?!" She begged.

Anri stared down at them and bit her lip. She seemed to be thinking about something. Behind Anri, Emilia saw Patrasche racing across the meadow, attracted by her partner's cries.

Finally Anri nodded. "Yes. There's an antidote."

"Please! You have to make it! You have to help him!" Emilia cried. "I can't lose him like this! I can't! There's so much that I still need to say! So many things I still have to make right!"

"Don't worry, Mili. We'll help him," Anri said seriously. "But we need ingredients. We need to get to Iruk."

"Iruk?!" Emilia objected. "Anri, this is no time-"

"I don't have time to argue, Emilia!" Anri said flatly. "I need the ingredients to make the cure and the only place nearby that we might find them is in Iruk. We need to go now."

Even in her terror, Emilia couldn't help but notice the change that had come over Anri.

She's gone from a smiley, bubbly girl to someone who's all business and clearly accustomed to giving orders.

Patrasche raced up, to nuzzle at her master with a cry of dismay.

"Patrasche!" Anri shouted. "Perfect timing."

Anri quickly went to mount the dragon.

Patrasche gave the girl a sharp look and for a moment it seemed like the dragon might throw her off or even attack her. But Patrasche looked down at her wounded master and seemed to decide to tolerate this for now.

"Emilia! Come on!" Anri barked as she sat down in the saddle.

Emilia picked up Subaru's limp and trembling body. His arm burned against her skin with the heat of an oven. "Anri, how are we going to keep Subaru on Patrasche?" Emilia shouted as she stumbled over to the riding dragon.

"You climb up in front of me. I'll control the dragon, you hold on tight to Subaru," She said matter-of-fact. "Also, remember to give me directions because I have no idea where I'm going!"

Anri reached down and helped Emilia climb onto the dragon with Subaru in her arms.

Emilia struggled to get settled in front of Anri while still holding Subaru tight. Anri tried to hold onto Emilia.

"Emilia!" Anri shouted. "Which way?!"

"That way!" Emilia shouted, pointing across the meadow.

Anri kicked Patrasche's ribs and the dragon took off like an arrow shot from the string.

"Anri! Why are we going to Iruk?!" Emilia demanded.

Anri was digging something out of her bag, seemingly leaving their direction to Patrasche. "Because... there's someplace in Iruk that I think I can get medicine..."

"Anri! There is *nothing* in Iruk!" Emilia protested. "I've seen it. It's a tiny one road town! I don't think that there was even a store there!"

"Emilia!" Anri shouted back. "Listen! I..." She hesitated and then sighed. "Look, I've already told you more than I should have!" She said, sounding as she was reproaching herself. "You're just going to have to trust me!"

Emilia bit her lip and slowly nodded.

Anri pulled something out of her bag and handed it to Emilia. "Here. Put this on Subaru," She said, shifting her attention back to the dragon's frantic passage through the forest.

Emilia took it and looked at it. "A belt?!" She asked incredulously.

"Put it on his arm!" Anri said impatiently. "Tie it on his arm above where the poison is and make it *tight*! Make it as tight as you possibly can!"

Emilia nodded and frantically slipped the belt around his upper arm and clinched it tight.

Subaru flinched and moaned.

"Anri! The belt is hurting him!" Emilia protested.

Anri sighed. "Not as much as that poison flowing into his organs will! Make the belt tight!"

Emilia hesitated and then pulled the belt as tight as she could.

Subaru flinched and started to fumble for the belt in his sleep, trying to loosen it.

"No!" Emilia said, taking his hands and holding them tight.

Subaru whimpered.

"Just... try to be calm, Subaru!" Emilia said desperately. "We're going to get you medicine and you're going to be all better. You have to be all better..." She whispered.

She shook her head. "Subaru! Just hang in there and we'll fix this and then we can go back to the forest or... I don't know where we'll go but we'll go somewhere, Subaru. We'll be fine as long as we're together. We were meant to be together..."

Patrasche thundered through the forest and Anri and Emilia could do nothing but hang on. The sky had opened and great clumps of wet snow fell onto them as they went.

"We're almost there!" Emilia shouted.

"Good," Anri muttered as she reached around Emilia to peel back one of Subaru's eyelids.

Emilia gasped. Subaru's eye had a network of strange black veins running through it.

The trees began to thin around them as they reached the forest edge. Patrasche burst through the last of the underbrush and raced across a wide open field that shifted from winter to summer in a single stride.

The heavy snow instantly changed to pouring rain.

"Hey, Emilia," Anri shouted. "I've never actually been here before. We need to find the church. Do you have any idea where that is?"

"I don't even know what a church looks like!" Emilia said in dismay.

Anri shook her head. "Don't worry about it. It should be easy to find. Churches are big and they have a lot of decorations outside. We should find it pretty easy."

"And that's where the medicine is?" Emilia asked desperately.

Anri bit her lip. "I sure hope so," She murmured.

Patrasche raced into the village.

I've never been this close to Iruk, Emilia thought, but it looks like what I told to Anri was correct. This town is terribly poor.

There are only a few houses here and they're all small and poorly maintained.

On the bright side, the rain seems to be keeping everyone inside this afternoon so at least nobody is seeing us come into town.

"There's the church!" Anri shouted, steering Patrasche toward the largest building in the village. It looked like nothing more than a slightly larger house with a small, squat tower on top.

"We're almost there, Subaru," Emilia whispered to him.

His sallow face twitched but he didn't respond.

Anri reined Patrasche to a halt in front of the church. She helped Emilia climb down with Subaru in her arms.

Then Anri sprang down off the dragon and threw herself at the church door, pounding at the stout wood.

"Who is it?" A low voice asked from the other side.

"Natalie!" Anri said in a great voice that trailed off. She bit her lip and cursed under her breath, looking as if she had just realized that she should have said this more quietly.

The door quickly opened and a beautiful woman with short blond hair emerged. She wore black pants that were probably leather of some kind, a tight white shirt, and a red beret.

"Princess!" She said in delight. "Man! Make me worry some more next time, why don't you?! I've been going out of my fucking mind just sitting here with my thumb stuck up my ass, wondering if you were safe or not. I was debating if I should go out and search the whole fucking road between here and Pardochel looking for you! What the hell happened? Where are..." The woman trailed off as she stared at Emilia in astonishment.

Emilia flushed and realized that she'd forgotten to pull up her hood.

All wet and bedraggled by the rain, I must look like more of a witch than usual.

"What the fuck," The woman said in a hard voice. "Is that limp-dick cock-sucker *doing* here?!"

Anri froze in place. "Victoire, you... recognize him?" She asked slowly.

Victoire looked offended. "...Of course I recognize him!"

Anri nodded looking sheepish. "Right. You've been working in Lagunica. I forgot." Anri hesitated for a moment. "Look, apparently the incident at Arlem was almost all lies! I assure you, Subaru is not a butcher or a mass murderer. Besides, he may be an enemy of House Voivode but that doesn't make him our enemy! Vlad an Voivode is just Prince Malcolm's attack dog anyway," Anri said dismissively.

"What is he *doing* here?!" Victoire repeated.

"They're friends of mine, Victoire. Subaru was badly poisoned fighting the Black Water," Anri said, pushing past the woman and gesturing for Emilia to follow.

"Fighting the *what*?" Victoire said in disbelief as Emilia swept past her with Subaru in her arms.

Emilia tried to ignore the looks of abject loathing that the woman was giving her.

The door led them into a cluttered kitchen. It wasn't very clean or well organized but the enormous spice rack that dominated one wall was fully stocked with oils and herbs of all kinds.

"Don't worry," Anri muttered as she studied the spice rack. "He managed to kill it."

Victoire's jaw dropped. "He did *what*?!" She exclaimed. "Are you telling me that this scrawny, little-"

"Look, Victoire, it's a *long* story and we've got no time to discuss it," Anri said dismissively as she pulled down several bags of dried herbs. "Where is everybody?"

Victoire, who was staring at Subaru with loathing, blinked as she finally realized that she'd been asked a question. She bit her lip and flushed. "Uh. I'm not sure if there's a way to break this gently, Princess," She said awkwardly. "But... I think I'm the only one who made it..."

Anri stared at Victoire in horror. "*What*?!" She gasped.

Victoire sighed. "We kept splitting up, trying to throw off pursuit and... I guess those freaks just kept... picking us off, one by one. I got here and waited for the others to show up but it's been three days now and no word. The others are either dead, or hiding somewhere and unable to help us."

Anri nodded slowly. "Yes... let's hope for that," Anri whispered.

"Anri!" Emilia whispered urgently, Subaru in her arms.

Anri jumped. "Oh! Victoire, is there a bed nearby? Somewhere that he can lay down?"

Victoire nodded but her face was still twisted in disgust when she looked at Subaru. "Sure. There are beds down the hall," She said reluctantly, pointing to a hallway next to the kitchen.

"Great. Emilia, why don't you lay Subaru down there. Victoire, I need a pot," Anri continued to gather herbs.

"Princess," Victoire said with an edge in her voice. "Forgive me for questioning your 'wise and puissant judgment' and all that garbage, but do you know what's going to happen when people find out about this?"

"Find out about what?"

Victoire fumed for a long moment. "Princess, *think* about it. If you're seen in the company of that little piss-ant, all the other Houses are going to think that you've made an alliance with Lagunica! Plus everyone thinks that he's a mass-murderer!"

Anri hesitated.

"Yeah! Picture it!" Victoire said pointedly. "So far the other Great Houses have sat out of this mess. I know you'd like them to take your side but if they think that you're dragging the southern lizard-worshippers into Gustekan affairs, they might join House Griest in fighting against you!"

Anri bit her lip and thought for a long moment. Finally she sighed. "Subaru has been poisoned by the Black Water and

I'm going to mix up a cure," Anri replied firmly, continuing to gather ingredients.

Victoire grumbled as she started to rummage through cabinets looking for a pot. "And you... know how to do that?" Victoire asked skeptically as she handed Anri a pot.

Anri just nodded. "I was studying medicine as a child so I could help my brother with his... Look, I've been required to study fencing for most of my life. I decided to study medicine as well. A good commander will keep her troops alive for the next battle and that means knowing how to tend to their wounds."

Emilia just stared at Anri in shock, barely able to follow the conversation.

Anri noticed Emilia's baffled gaze and shifted awkwardly. "Look, Emilia," She sighed. "I'm sure that you have plenty of questions right now but first you need to put Subaru to bed. Make sure that he stays warm. We rode through a freezing storm to get here and the last thing we need is for Subaru to come down with pneumonia."

I don't know what that is but it sounds bad, Emilia nodded and carried Subaru down the dark hall.

"Hey, Princess!" Victoire said in a strangled whisper, not realizing how good Emilia's hearing really was. "This place is supposed to be a secret! House Griest already has us by the balls and they're picking us off one by one. *More* people knowing about our safe-houses is the absolute *last* fucking thing that we need!"

"They saved my life, Victoire," Anri said patiently. "I need to help them in return."

Emilia walked slower, listening carefully.

"Yeah well, forgive me, Princess, that's really fucking noble of you and everything but don't we already have enough frigging problems without you dragging a she-elf and that... prick, into it?!"

"He's going to die if I don't heal him," Anri said firmly. "So I'm going to heal him! Period. If you want them to be gone faster then build up the fire and help me get the medicine ready. I'm sure that they both want to be gone just as badly as you want them gone!"

"Princess! Do you know what your Uncle and Grandfather are going to say?! These two know about the safe-house and we're just going to let them walk away? We usually kill people just to-"

"Enough, Victoire!" Anri's voice crackled.

Victoire fumed. "Princess, when your Uncle and Grandfather find out about this, it's going to be my ass!"

"And you'll tell them that you were following *my* orders," Anri said in a tone of finality.

Victoire didn't reply and Emilia heard Anri gathering more ingredients.

Emilia opened a door down the hall and found a big, cozy bed with a heavy fur blanket lying on top.

She gently took off Subaru's clothes and laid him under the covers.

Subaru didn't stir.

Emilia checked his arm and saw that thin veins of black were beginning to creep up past the belt. The flesh below the belt looked yellowed, shriveled, and dessicated. It looked like the limb of a person long dead.

Emilia, in desperation, tried to tighten the belt a little more.

Subaru whimpered in his sleep.

"It's going to be OK, Subaru," Emilia whispered.

I'm not going to cry! You only cry when there's nothing else to do! Anri is making medicine and Subaru is going to be all better so I won't cry!

Emilia forced a smile on her face that looked like a grimace. She took one last lingering look at Subaru and then returned to the kitchen.

Emilia walked silently down the hall. Even from outside the room she could hear Anri and Victoire's whispered conversation.

Anri sighed. "By the Gods. I... I just can't believe that things have gotten so bad in just a few weeks..."

Victoire nodded. "Yeah. Things are pretty fucking shit back home."

"I can't believe how badly the war is going!" Anri said incredulously.

"It's weird," Victoire growled. "It's almost like Malcolm an Griest knows what we're going to do before we do it! I think he may be using some kind of strange magic..."

"What kind of magic could do that?" Anri asked in a worried tone.

"Dunno. I'm not a mage. But something is weird here. I've met Malcolm an Griest. He is *not* this clever."

"Maybe he just has a new adviser," Anri suggested.

"Maybe," Victoire admitted. "But the last I heard, he doesn't listen to his advisers. Prince Malcolm is not a smart man and like most stupid people he thinks he's absolutely fucking brilliant and that he doesn't need any advice."

"My Uncle once said that a stupid enemy is a gift from the Gods," Anri said.

"Normally yeah but for whatever reason, this war isn't going well for us. Siros is under attack. The city isn't surrounded yet but the armies are choking off all the trade routes. What's even worse is that something is eating the entire Shadow organization bite by bite. Your Uncle and Grandpa are in a desperate situation."

"Did they sent any advice or instructions for me?" Anri asked desperately.

Victoire shook her head. "Nah. Things are bad though. I think they were probably expecting you to run to Lagunica and take shelter there-"

"I can't do that!" Anri protested indignantly. "My people are in danger! I can't just run away and do nothing!"

Victoire sounded guilty. "Hey, Princess? Sorry, but I've got to be pretty fucking blunt here."

"Well gee, that's a shocker," Anri rolled her eyes. "I've never known you Shadows to speak any other way."

Victoire snickered. "Look, I'm just saying, reading between the lines of your Grandpa's last note, I think that they're standing out in the woods with their breeches down-"

"Wow. That's an image," Anri murmured.

Victoire continued. "The trade routes have all been blockaded and supplies in Siros are running short. Worse, your grandfather wrote that the other Shadows have learned of a second column of soldiers scheduled to depart from Sanshi to assault Siros within the next few days."

"Another column?!" Anri said incredulously. "How many soldiers does that madman have?!"

Victoire snorted. "Hey, Sanshi has a lot of people. You know what those sluts are like. Buy a Sanshi girl a beer and her thighs are open before she finishes it. The point is, I've got to tell you, Princess, I think it might be time for you to consider some... drastic action..."

"What kind of drastic action?"

Victoire hesitated. "Well... there's always the thing in the Vault below the Grand Archives..." She murmured awkwardly.

Emilia stepped into the kitchen and found Anri and Victoire sitting at the table. A cauldron of something with the consistency of mud bubbled over the fire.

Anri was silent for a long moment. Her voice was strangled, "How did you-"

Victoire sighed. "Please, Princess. The Shadows have served your family for centuries. We're spies. We're *supposed* to know things that we're not supposed to know."

Anri closed her eyes. "Victoire, I think that sentence almost broke my brain," She moaned.

"What I'm saying is that finding out stuff that we're not supposed to know about is kind of our whole deal. It's what we do. You don't just fucking turn that on out in the field and then forget about it when you're back home. My boys and I are... aware of a lot of stuff that folks might prefer that we aren't. But we need to know about it if we're going to give you good advice, right?"

Anri's voice was hard. "*No one* is supposed to know about this, Victoire. If Grandfather even *suspected* that you knew, he'd order the Shadows to kill you!"

Victoire had a grim look on her face. "Yeah, Princess, *believe* me I am well-fucking-aware of the fact that owning up to what I know is putting my head on the block! That's why I never brought it up until we were absolutely-fucking-desperate."

"On a related note, your Grandpa might want to think twice before ordering the execution of any Shadow who knows something that they shouldn't. The service would end up pretty fucking empty by the time he was finished. Anyway, I told your Highness what I know and *why* I know it. What you do with that information is up to you. I could give you vows and assurances of my loyalty and all that crap but hey, if you trust me then you don't need those assurances and if you don't trust me, why would you listen to *any* of the bullshit that fell out of my mouth?" Victoire finished matter-of-fact.

Anri made a face at Victoire, then covered her eyes with her hand. "Gods, I just *love* dealing with you Shadows," She sighed.

Victoire laughed. "Yeah, I've heard your Grandpa make similar comments, Princess."

Emilia deliberately stepped on a squeaky floorboard.

Anri jumped and Victoire looked darkly at Emilia.

"Oh!" Anri said. "Emilia! How's Subaru?"

For a moment, Emilia thought that she would burst into tears but she fought them back and managed to dry her eyes. "Where is the medicine, Anri?" She asked plaintively.

"It's cooking right now," Anri said, pointing at the cauldron.

"Cooking?" Emilia asked in surprise.

Anri nodded. "The 'Draught of Unquenchable Flame' is a potion that can curse many kinds of witchcraft poisoning but it spoils in a matter of hours. It needs to be made fresh for each use."

"But how long will that take?!"

Anri shook her head. "Not long. It will be ready soon, Emilia. I promise."

Victoire cleared her throat. "Hey, Princess, maybe the elf should go and keep an eye on her... man. We, uh, do have a couple of... *private* things to discuss."

Victoire glared at Emilia with contempt. Emilia endured her gaze without blinking, having seen far worse.

"Look, her name is Emilia, *not* 'the elf'," Anri's voice crackled with suppressed fury. "She saved my life." Anri took a deep breath. "Victoire, I realize that lots of people in Gusteko have a low opinion of demi-humans," Anri said in a more composed voice. "But Emilia and Subaru have been my rescuers and my friends when I was in a desperate situation. They offered me aid and shelter when I had nothing to offer them but my thanks. I see no reason not to trust-"

"It's fine, Anri," Emilia sighed. "We all have secrets that we'd rather keep hidden. While I certainly would be willing to keep your confidences, you don't know me very well and for me to be elsewhere while you have a private discussion would give you one less thing to worry about."

Anri looked guilty. "I mean, I don't want to kick you out, Emilia..."

"Please don't worry about it, Anri," Emilia forced herself to smile. "Frankly, I'd rather be with Subaru right now anyway."

Anri nodded. "Of course. I'll be in to check on him shortly. The medicine will take a while to cook but we can at least make him more comfortable in the meantime."

Emilia took a deep breath and sank into a curtsy. "I am truly grateful... Princess."

"Hey! It's 'Anri!' And please, skip the bowing! I get so sick of all that formality back home!" Anri said with a chuckle. Her expression grew more serious. "Don't worry about it, Mili. Helping Subaru is the least that I can do. You two saved my life after all."

Emilia nodded and left the kitchen to return to Subaru's bedside.

She wasn't trying to listen to their conversation as she walked back down the hall but she couldn't help it.

"Do you have any letters from Grandfather?" Anri asked.

"Well, I did, Princess. But I ate them."

"...You *ate* them?!"

"Hey! It's standard protocol! Get a message, read it, memorize it, destroy it. You know how this fucking works."

"Couldn't you have just... burned them?" Anri asked in distaste.

"Princess, I'm a fucking spy! I don't usually carry lit torches around with me when I go to check drop-boxes. They make it pretty fucking hard to blend in."

"Never mind," Anri sighed. She paused a moment. "Hey, Victoire, did you know... Hunnicutt?"

"Not very well. I only met him for the first time when I met you in Pardochel. Uh, Princess? You used the past tense. Did he...?"

"He died trying to get my away from the assassins," Anri said quietly. "We were attacked by mabeasts but he managed to save my life and get me safely up a tree before he died."

Victoire sighed. "Yeah, that really bites, Princess. But speaking as a Shadow, I can tell you with absolute-fucking-certainty that he would be frigging stoked to see that you got here alive and in one piece."

Anri sighed. "Maybe. But I'm not really looking forward to trying to explain to his family why their loved one had to die..."

"He died saving his Princess," Victoire said bluntly. "Most Shadows I've met would consider that a high achievement."

Anri sighed. "Victoire, did Grandfather... mention the Grand Archives in his missives?"

"Nah," Victoire replied. "Not that those notes would be a smart place to discuss these kind of secrets anyway. Messages can always be snatched and intercepted, even when they're being guarded by Shadows. I'm just bringing up the Vault because frankly, we're running real fucking short on any halfway decent options..."

Emilia opened Subaru's door.

Anri took a deep breath. "I'm not ready to discuss that... yet, at least. The Vault was sealed for a reason. We should pursue other options first."

"Whatever, Princess. I'm totally at your command and all that stuff," Victoire yawned. "So my only other idea is to get over the border for a while. I know some places in Lagunica where you could hide out until the dust settles. I don't think that Griest wants you badly enough to risk a war with the dragon kingdom to get you."

"I can't do that!" Anri protested.

"Damn. Just keep shooting down my ideas, why don't you?"

Anri gave an exasperated sigh. "Victoire, our people are fighting in a war. I can't just... run away!"

"Well, we need to do *something* pretty fucking soon, you know?" Victoire said quietly. "Your Grandpa's last note said that he thinks that Griest might know about our network of safe-houses."

"I... I just don't know... what to do..." Anri whimpered.

Victoire sighed. "Look, Princess," Victoire said in a kind voice. "I know that we were never as close as you were to some of your other bodyguards-"

"That's not true, Victoire," Anri said reassuringly. "We had lots of fun in Pardochel. Remember when you sneaked me out that night so we could visit that dance hall?"

Victoire snorted. "I thought you needed a break after all those boring conferences. I mean, sure you're a fucking Princess but you're still a kid. You need to have some fun in your life!"

"When we finally got back, Vera looked she was going to have a stroke!" Anri giggled. She sighed. "I hope that Vera is OK..."

"She's the most experienced Shadow around, Princess," Victoire said firmly. "If I had to put my money on just *one* of us surviving, it would be her. I refuse to believe that someone like me, who is obviously just devastatingly beautiful but not the most experienced Shadow, fucking lived through this disaster and Vera didn't!"

Anri laughed.

"Look, Princess, what I meant to say," Victoire continued in a soothing voice. "Is that I'm still here and I'm not leaving you. I'll take care of you. This magnificent lady is going to get you home again safely, no matter what it takes. I know that we weren't especially close compared to you and Vera, but... so long as I'm the only one you have left, I'll do whatever I fucking have to. I'll keep you safe."

Emilia closed the bedroom door behind her.

She quietly sat down on the bed beside Subaru, trying not to disturb him.

Subaru was moaning and squirming under the covers.

Emilia began to stroke his forehead until he settled down slightly.

She peaked under the covers and saw that the thin streaks of yellowy brown that had been creeping up Subaru's arm were beginning to surmount his shoulder.

Emilia took a deep breath and bit her lip so that she wouldn't burst into tears.

Subaru saved me again and now he's lying here in pain and we don't know if he'll even live!

This is just like Elsa all over again! Subaru saved my life that night and all I could do afterward was sit there, hold his hand, and cry!

He saved me... and I could do nothing for him...

Roswaal and Reinhard summoned the best healers in the capitol. They told me all about Elsa's poison and how it prevented the wounds from clotting. They didn't know how to close the wounds.

The healers were kind but they all said that there wasn't much that they could do and that I should ready myself for the worst.

That night was one of the most miserable nights of my life. Almost as bad as the night that I cursed the forest.

I'm always so helpless. I can never protect the people I love.

That night, I told Puck that we should go back to the forest. If I couldn't even protect Subaru then I didn't want to be King. I didn't deserve to be King. How could I lead a nation if I couldn't even keep my only friend safe?

I was about to tell Roswaal that I would be leaving the next morning to return to Elio when the healers told me that Subaru's wounds had stopped bleeding. They called it a miracle.

I was ecstatic. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to be right there when Subaru woke up so that I could tell him how grateful I was.

Roswaal convinced me to go back to the manor with him since it might be days before Subaru woke up. He promised that he'd invite Subaru to come visit straightaway and he reminded me that so long as I was in the Royal Selection, I had responsibilities.

Reinhard assured me that Subaru would have the best care possible and I agreed to go home with Roswaal but I begged Reinhard to tell Subaru how grateful I was and that I wanted to see him again so that I could thank him personally.

And now, here we are again. It's been two months but we've finally come full circle. Subaru has saved my life one more time and now he's lying here terribly wounded and I don't know if he's going to live or not...

And once again, I can do nothing. I don't know if Anri's potion will work. It could be vegetable broth for all I know!

Why am I always so useless...

Subaru coughed weakly.

Emilia laid down beside him and wrapped her arms around him.

Don't die, Subaru. Please don't die. You're all that I have left in this world.

Puck has disowned me. Our friends want me dead. Without you, I have nothing!

I am very selfish, Subaru. I need you to be alive in order to be happy. If you died, I'd want to...

Emilia lay there, crying.

Sometime later, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Emilia murmured.

The door opened and Anri crept inside. "Hey, Mili," She said gently. "How are you holding up?"

Emilia took a deep breath. "I'm doing better than Subaru is, I suppose," She said in a broken voice.

Anri grimaced as she sat down down on the bed beside her. "Let's take a look."

Anri peeled back the blanket and inspected Subaru's body. Emilia clapped a hand over her mouth to hold back a scream. The yellowy color had crept up his collar bone and his entire left arm looked like fried meat.

To Emilia's shock, Anri's face brightened. "This is great!"

"What?!" Emilia gasped.

"This is outstanding, Emilia!" Anri said excitedly.

"How can you even say that?!" Emilia demanded.

Anri looked at her and winced. "Oh. Sorry, Mili. I guess that was a pretty tactless thing for me to say," Anri said shamefaced. "What I meant is that the venom is progressing very slowly," Anri explained. "His arm is pretty bad but that can be healed. It might take a bit of magic but you can always heal a ruined limb. Ruined organs, not so much. The tourniquet that you put on his arm is really doing it's job. The venom still hasn't reached any vital organs. All we need to do is give him the medicine and it should neutralize the poison. Really, his condition looks very good," Anri said, trying to be reassuring.

Anri doesn't sound like she's lying but how can anyone say that this looks good?!

Anri made a face and coughed. "So... You must have a lot of questions about... me and Victoire and what we're doing and... everything else," She said awkwardly.

"No, not really," Emilia sighed.

Anri looked at her in surprise.

Emilia smiled sadly. "No offense, Anri, but at the moment I wouldn't care if you and Victoire were plotting to release the Witch of Envy. All I want is to get that medicine for Subaru and make him better."

Anri nodded. "I understand. He's going to be fine, Mili," She promised.

They sat in silence for a time.

"Are you really a princess?" Emilia asked, mostly just to end the silence.

Anri grinned. "Yeah but don't get too excited. The title is a lot less impressive in Gusteko."

"What do you mean?"

"How much do you know about Gusteko?"

"Almost nothing," Emilia sighed.

Anri chuckled. "Well, Gusteko is a clannish society. There are six Great Houses and hundreds of minor ones. Each Great House controls its own province and they're all fiercely independent. The country is only united by the Church; by the Hierocracy of Patriarchs led by the Holy King. The current Holy King is dying and all the great Houses are starting to maneuver for his replacement to be selected. The Great Spirit, Odglass, is the one who has the right to choose the Holy King."

Emilia nodded. "I've read that she occupies a role similar to the Divine Dragon in Lagunica."

"Yeah, something like that. The Kingship of Gusteko isn't inherited. Each House will present the scions it views as worthy to inherit the throne. The Hierocracy will vet them and the ones approved will be presented to Odglass for her choice. Each Great House is ruled by a Prince or Princess. So it would be roughly analogous to a Lagunican Duke."

"Strange system," Emilia murmured in disinterest.

Anri shrugged. "It's sort of a throwback to the old days. Two hundred years back, Gusteko was just a collection of tiny independent kingdoms and each was ruled by a King. Then when the country was technically unified, calling oneself 'King' became taboo. It's provocative to the other Princes. Calling yourself 'King' makes people think that you have expansionist urges."

Emilia didn't respond.

They sat in silence for a bit.

"My real name," Anri continued, "Is Kairei vas Sirose an Ithil."

Emilia took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Honestly, I don't want to talk right now. I could care less about Gusteko politics or even Anri right now. But if the conversation stops then all I'll be able to hear is my own miserable thoughts.

Finally, Emilia mustered the energy to continue the conversation. "Why did you pick 'Anri' for an alias?" Emilia muttered.

"I didn't. 'Anri' is a real nickname for 'Kairei.'"

Emilia looked at her. "How do you get Anri from Kairei?" Emilia asked in a barely curious tone.

Anri chuckled. "Foreigners usually find Gusteko nicknames very complicated. Every given name has a bunch of nicknames associated with it. Beyond that, it's common to refer to someone by their baptized name or their matronymic names, both of which outsiders have a hard time keeping straight. I even read that a popular Gusteko novel was published in Lagunica and Kararagi but that they needed to add a spreadsheet of what nicknames referred to what characters just so that readers could follow the story!"

Emilia didn't respond.

Anri stared at her for a time and then sighed. "Emilia, he's going to be alright," She said.

Emilia gave her a look of absolute misery. "You can't know that," She whispered.

Anri hesitated. "I am *ninety nine* percent sure," She admitted. "Look, Emilia, you're doing no good sitting in here like this. You're just making yourself crazy."

Emilia shook her head. "Anri, why do I keep doing this to Subaru?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is all my fault," Emilia whimpered.

Anri stared at her. "What?! How can you even say that?! This was in no way your fault!"

"I attacked the Black Water, Anri," Emilia hissed at herself, her voice venomous. "Subaru wanted to run but I raced after the Black Water to try to fight it. If I hadn't dragged Subaru into this fight, he'd be fine right now! I'm killing Subaru just by being around him..."

Anri looked at her incredulously. "That's not even close to what happened!"

Emilia gave her a tired, skeptical look.

Anri shook her head firmly. "Hey, Mili, I was there, remember? You *didn't* drag Subaru into the fight. You ran after the monster and left him behind. *He* ran after you. This wasn't your fault."

Emilia sighed. She pulled her knees to her chest and buried her face in them.

Anri continued. "And while we're on the subject, let's not forget how freaking amazing what Subaru did actually was. I never imagined that one person could even *survive* fighting the Black Water, much less be able to kill it! This was an act of incredible heroism, Emilia!"

Emilia looked up at Anri incredulously. "So what?!" She snapped. "Who cares if what Subaru did was heroic?! I want a live husband, Anri, not a dead martyr!"

Emilia belatedly realized that she was shouting at Anri.

Anri flinched and bowed her head. "Right. I know, I know," She said, her voice chastened. "I'm sorry."

Emilia buried her face back in her knees.

Anri sighed. "How long have the two of you been together?" Anri asked.

Emilia lifted her head and mentally added it up and then frowned. She counted again. *Impossible. Have I really know Subaru for less than two months? It just... It doesn't seem real. The time before I knew Subaru, before I saw his smile everyday and held his hand and leaned on his determination, those days belong to the distant past.*

The old Emilia was a pitiable creature. A girl, lonely and shamed, who never realized how much happiness life could offer her...

Anri watched Emilia get lost in her own thoughts and she frowned at her in concern. "...You said that he was from Vollachia originally?" Anri prompted.

Emilia shook her head. "No. Subaru is from beyond the Great Waterfall."

"What?!" Anri gasped.

Emilia was unable to completely hide her amusement at the expression of shock on Anri's face.

Subaru must be rubbing off on me. Now I'm the one telling someone earth-shattering news as if it was no big deal. Subaru always thought that it was funny to do that to me. This is the first time that I ever had a chance to do it myself. It is pretty amusing, honestly.

...I just wish that he'd stop doing it to me.

"Are you... serious?!" Anri demanded.

Emilia nodded. "Entirely," She said a little smugly.

Anri's eyes darted all over the room, she seemed deep in thought. Finally she cleared her throat and got to her feet. "Look, Emilia, Victoire is making some food. Let's go check on the medicine and have a bite to eat. Sitting here and brooding is doing you absolutely no good."

Emilia didn't answer.

Anri reached out and took Emilia's hand. She gently tugged on her arm until Emilia begrudgingly got to her feet. Emilia seemed to have no strength left to resist. Anri led Emilia out of the room, Emilia looking back plaintively at Subaru's body which was still writhing in pain. She stretched out a hand to him helplessly.

"Holy King Gillecomgain is suffering from a serious disease," Anri said sadly, as she checked on the bubbling medicine over the fire. "He's still pretty young but the healers claim that he doesn't have much time left. This means that the Houses are starting to lobby to become the next Holy King."

Emilia bit into the sandwich that Victoire had made. She ate without tasting it. Victoire sat with her feet up on the table, looking at Emilia darkly. When she got tired of glowering at Emilia, the woman shifting to playing a game of throwing her beret into the air and then catching it.

Anri returned to the table and sat down next to Emilia.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Emilia said in a dead voice, continuing the conversation mostly out of a sense of obligation. "If Odglass selects the Holy King then what is there to lobby for or fight about?"

Anri looked pained. "The Houses... 'lobby' for one of their candidates to be made king by bribing Church Patriarchs to vote against their enemies so they won't even be presented to Odglass. Less wealthy Houses try to narrow the field more directly, by killing other candidates. Each rival killed is less competition. I recently met with the Hierocracy at Pardochel to declare my candidacy for the Holy Throne," She said in a dour voice that suggested this hadn't been done entirely willingly. "And my retinue was attacked on the way home by assassins, probably sent by House Griest. Except for Victoire, I... was the only survivor of my party, as far as I know," Anri finished, her voice becoming somber.

"I'm... so sorry," Emilia said.

Victoire rolled her eyes. "Come on, Princess!" She urged. "There was *nothing* that you could have done! When the odds are stacked against you, you either beat feet or you become dead meat. That's what they taught me during training. Those assassins were barely human! Face it, if you'd stayed to fight them, you would have died too and the others' sacrifices would have been for nothing! Be happy that you're still alive and fighting for your people. They would be!"

Anri sighed. "Honestly, Victoire, I don't know if I can say with a straight face that they *did* die for anything. They just died to save some underage princess who can't even do anything to protect herself, much less her people..."

"I have to agree with Victoire," Emilia said sadly. "I know what it's like to be placed in an impossible situation that you have no hope of handling successfully. And I know the guilt of knowing that you're responsible for the tragic outcome. You need to measure your actions according to what *Anri* could have reasonably done, not what some mythical 'perfect person' could have done in your place."

Anri stared at Emilia for a long moment and then slowly nodded.

Victoire glowered at Emilia, seemingly not assuaged by Emilia taking her side.

Emilia sighed. "Is House Griest your enemy?" Emilia asked.

Anri nodded. "House Griest is the most powerful of the Houses. They're heavy favorites to regain the throne after unexpectedly losing it to a lesser House, House Ulgo, thirty years ago. That said, it's rumored that Odglass does *not* favor them so Prince Malcolm is taking advantage of the Holy King's incapacitation to attack his enemies."

"What about the Hierocracy?" Emilia asked.

Anri shook her head. "The Hierocracy will follow the Holy King's lead. Without a King to unify them, they tend to fall into internecine bickering so that nothing gets done. If House Griest attacked more Houses or stirred up enough trouble then the Hierocracy *might* intervene but as long as the only House affected by this is House Ithil, it won't earn the Hierocracy's immediate attention."

"What makes House Ithil so special? Why are you being targeted?"

Anri sighed. "House Ithil is... an upstart, I suppose you'd call us. The other Houses don't like us very much. We only recovered our status as a Great House during my parents' time."

"Recovered it?" Emilia asked.

Anri thought for a moment and then bowed her head with a sigh. "See, life in Gusteko revolves around two things: the House and the Church. To be a person without a House is to be an 'unperson.' A person who belongs to no House has barely any legal rights, although exceptions are sometimes made for foreign merchants. Centuries ago, before the modern Hierocracy and Holy King had even come into being, there was a great war between Lagunica and Gusteko. The Dragon appeared to defend Lagunica and Gusteko lost the war terribly. Trying to salvage the situation, the King of Gusteko ordered my ancestors to do... something," Anri said ominously.

Anri shook her head. "They refused. In a fit of rage, the King declared that House Ithil had been excommunicated and removed from the roll of Houses of Gusteko," Anri said gravely.

Emilia screwed her face up in confusion. "What... does that mean?"

Anri sighed. "It means that we were considered a House accursed and had barely any protection under the law. My family, our servants, the people who simply lived in our domain, all of them were shunned. They were refused admission to shops and thrown out of taverns. If one of us was assaulted, the courts denied that we had any right to seek justice. This lasted for centuries until my parents fell in battle, protecting the Holy King from assassins. The Holy King praised their courage and in recognition, he raised House Ithil back to its former status."

"That must be reassuring," Emilia murmured.

Anri's face twisted. "If I'm being honest, I'd rather just have my parents back. For me, the restoration has just caused more problems."

"How? Shouldn't that have ended them?"

"The Holy King may have restored my family's standing but most of the other Houses still don't like us very much. Some of them even still blame us for the loss of that dumb war two hundred years ago! Besides that, when my House was not 'accredited' it survived by focusing on trade and commerce. My parents made our fortune back by brokering deals with the merchants in Kararagi and cutting roads through the southern mountains to open trade routes between Kararagi and Gusteko. This was not an altogether popular decision," She muttered.

"What do you mean?" Emilia asked.

Anri gave a humorless laugh. "Most people in Gusteko are violently isolationist and strongly prejudiced against demi-humans. All of this gave House Griest an opening to try and organize the other Houses against us. Now Prince Malcolm is trying to kill me and he's sent an army to Siros to try to seize our lands."

Emilia shook her head sadly. "And this is all just because House Griest hates demi-humans?" Emilia sighed.

Anri looked awkward. "No. I mean, yes but that's not really what this is all about."

"I don't understand."

Anri gave a humorless laugh. "The truth is that this is all about money! Sanshi territory is just north of Lagunica. The southern mountains that wall off Gusteko from Kararagi and Lagunica are impassable for the most part, especially in the winter. Since House Griest controlled the only safe way through the mountains into Gusteko for centuries, all

northern commerce originally had to pass through Sanshi and pay exorbitant tariffs to House Griest in order to bring their wares to market. This made House Griest fantastically wealthy. However, when my House opened the other trade routes to Kararagi, that revenue dwindled. Prince Malcolm has been trying to use xenophobia and racism to rally the other Houses against House Ithil so that Griest will control the trade routes again."

Emilia was confused. "I don't understand. What does isolation and demi-humans have to do with tariffs?"

Anri snorted. "Marketing! Prince Malcolm can't walk around to the other houses and say: 'House Ithil is costing me money, I want you to send your soldiers to fight and die against House Ithil so that I can be wealthier.' He's claiming that the influx of Kararagi merchants are diluting the racial purity of Gusteko since those merchants are often demi-human. Most Lagunican merchants tend to be human so they're easier for the reactionary faction in Gusteko to tolerate. Honestly, as far as propaganda campaigns go, it's not that bad a strategy."

Emilia puzzled her way through that. "And nobody else is challenging this?"

Anri shrugged. "The Hierocracy is too fragmented to do much of anything right now and the Holy King is too sick. Most of the other Houses are maintaining that this isn't their problem. Prince Malcolm is hoping that his son Canmore will gain the Holy King's throne," Anri continued. "So he's also waging war to demonstrate his House's strength and to try to force the other Houses into line. If he succeeds in crushing his opposition and killing most of the other candidates before Holy King Gillecomgain dies, his odds of taking the throne will increase."

Emilia stared at her. "Then, you're a candidate for the throne?"

Anri snorted dismissively. "One of hundreds! Every House submits at least one candidate, no matter how remote their odds of taking the throne actually are! Or there *were* hundreds of candidates anyway, I have no idea how many of us are left at this point. I doubt those assassins were just coming after me. Of course, the other reason Prince Malcolm wants to kill me is just to destroy my House," She said bitterly.

Emilia's face twisted in sympathy. "I'm very sorry to hear that. Subaru and I were once candidates for the Lagunican throne as well," Emilia said without thinking. "But I'm afraid that we may not be candidates for much longer, given... given everything that we've gone through recently. Truthfully, I think that I'd be altogether happier if we weren't involved in the royal selection anymore. Dealing with the nobility's prejudices as well as all the ceremonies and glad-handing was making me miserable..."

Anri nodded enthusiastically. "I so get what you mean. In some ways, the past few weeks of being free from the restrictions of the nobility is a blessing from the gods, even if everybody is trying to kill me. For once, there aren't hundreds of people evaluating how I chew my food and suggesting that my great-great-grandmother would have taken smaller, more lady-like bites! Or telling me that my second cousin twice-removed words her thoughts more eloquently," Anri rolled her eyes.

Emilia actually laughed.

Anri thought for a moment. "I'd heard that Lagunica was choosing a new King but I don't know any of the details. Were there hundreds of candidates there too?"

Emilia shook her head. "Very few," She said with a sigh.

Anri looked at Emilia strangely. "Emilia, I knew that Subaru Natsuki was considered the forerunner for the Lagunican throne but I'd never heard that an elf was involved. Honestly, I would have thought that would have been bigger news. All kinds of small-minded idiots in Gusteko would have liked to make hay out of that."

Emilia, you are such a dummy! Why did you say that?! You know that nobody remembers you!

"It's... I..." Emilia struggled to put what had happened to her into words and finally gave up. "Never mind. You'd never believe me anyway..."

Anri gave her a speculative look. "No? Well, maybe you should tell us anyway. We'd like to hear the story. Right, Victoire?"

Victoire was still playing a game of catch with her beret and clearly not listening to this conversation. "Oh yeah, I'm just so fucking stoked to hear all about this," Victoire said in a bored tone, her feet resting on the table.

Anri shot Victoire a look of annoyance then got up to check the bubbling medicine. "Come on, Mili. We have a while before the medicine is going to be ready. It'll make the time go by quicker. Besides, after all this, I'm really curious how the upstart prince of Lagunica wound up falling in love with an elven woman and a suspected witch. I mean, I love reading romance novels but if someone recommended a book to me and told me that this was the plot to the story, I'd tell them that the book went way beyond believability," Anri said teasingly.

Emilia sighed. *I suppose I could use the distraction... And really, who cares if they believe me? I've been called a liar so many times since we left the Sanctuary. One more won't kill me.*

Emilia took a deep breath. "I became a candidate for the royal throne of Lagunica several months ago. Lord Roswaal found me living in the Elier Forest and explained to me that by the magic of an ancient insignia, he knew that I was qualified to stand for election as King. My people in the forest lay under a terrible curse. They were all frozen solid long ago. My... father and I had lived alone in the forest for years. Roswaal convinced me that the sacred dragon blood, which only the King of Lagunica has access to, could break the curse. So I left the forest and tried to become King. For months, I... really accomplished nothing. Most people laughed at the thought of *any* demi-human sitting on the throne, much less a silver haired half-elf. In my weaker moments, I sometimes wondered if Roswaal had recruited me as

secretly just some kind of cruel joke..."

Emilia glanced at Anri who stood stirring the medicine with a considering look on her face.

She continued, "Then I met Subaru. My insignia had been stolen by a pickpocket and this removed my right to stand for election. I had to get the insignia back if I was going to have any chance of saving my people. Subaru helped me locate the insignia. He almost... died helping me get it back. Subaru had held my insignia and it reacted to him so we knew that he was qualified to become King as well. Because my insignia had left my possession, I was about to be disqualified from the election. I thought that I'd failed and that my people would be frozen forever. But Subaru offered to marry me to keep me in the election so that I could save my people..."

"He offered to marry you?" Anri said in shock. "Just like that?!"

Emilia nodded. "Subaru told the sages' council that we'd gotten engaged before he touched my insignia. Because as a married couple, our interests would be joined under the law, it let us both stay in the election. It was the only way that he could think of to keep me in the royal selection."

Anri whistled. "That's amazing! It is just like the plot from a romance novel!"

Emilia squinted at her, uncertain of how to respond to that. "My Subaru is very kind," She said finally. "Subaru took the lead in our quest for the throne and for a time it seemed that we were nearly unstoppable. It felt like everyone wanted Subaru on the throne. Even if that meant... taking me too..."

Emilia bowed her head and took a deep breath. "Then... everything went wrong. I made a foolish mistake and once again, I ruined so many lives..."

"What do you mean?" Anri asked in concern.

Emilia sighed. "I was determined to prove to Subaru that I was worthy to stand beside him as an equal. That I wasn't just... some girl that he'd always have to rescue and take care of. I wanted to be someone who could take care of him as well. I... I wanted to make Subaru proud of me..." She whispered.

"Of course you did!" Anri encouraged. "Who wouldn't? That's a very noble objective! It shows bravery, determination, and empathy! I'm sure that Subaru approved."

Emilia shook her head. "No. Subaru tried to talk me out of it," She whispered dejectedly. "He didn't want us to be separated but I insisted. Subaru went to slay the White Whale and I went with Roswaal to attend a gathering of village chiefs so that I could campaign for our election. Unfortunately, Roswaal had betrayed us and we were attacked by a monster, the Sin Archbishop Peteleguese. He chased us away from the village and Roswaal led us to the Sanctuary without telling us that once we were inside, we would be trapped. Only pure blooded individuals can pass through the Sanctuary barrier without dying. That meant that everyone was trapped inside the Sanctuary and I was the only one who was qualified to take the trials that would get us out."

"Trials?" Anri asked in confusion.

She sighed. "Three magical tests that needed to be passed in order to lower the barrier. I attempted to take the trials everyday for two weeks and I failed constantly. I never even got past the first trial. I always collapsed wailing and screaming every time I tried." She shook her head and scowled. "And then I had to be carried back to my bed," Emilia said in a tone of deep disgust.

"What were these trials?" Anri asked.

Emilia sighed. "They were magical visions. The first trial was my past. It forced me to confront the worst mistake of my life. I just... couldn't get past it. I couldn't endure watching it happen again. Even knowing that it was only a vision, all I could do was throw every drop of magic I had at the image of that little monster, trying to obliterate my younger self. I did this everyday for weeks."

Anri looked at her sympathetically.

"This was all part of Roswaal's plan, you see," Emilia continued. "He planned to grind me down and break me. He wanted to make it impossible for me to ever pass the trials. Then he somehow manipulated the Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult to come to the Sanctuary to kill everyone while we were still trapped there."

Anri gasped.

"We only had a few hours before the Sin Archbishops arrived and I was no closer to passing the trials than I had been my first day in the Sanctuary but I was the only one who could take them!"

"How did you realize that Roswaal was tricking you?" Anri asked.

Emilia hung her head in shame. "I didn't," She growled at herself. "I *never* realized it. I was completely oblivious to it! Subaru managed to figure it out after being in the Sanctuary for less than a day. He confronted Roswaal and he admitted to it. Roswaal thought that he had Subaru trapped somewhere that he couldn't escape from."

Emilia sighed. "Actually, that's a lie. *Subaru* knew that he could pass through the barrier because he was pure blooded. But Roswaal knew that Subaru *wouldn't* do it. He knew that Subaru... would never... abandon me..."

Emilia was silent for a long moment. "Roswaal told Subaru that he'd grant him the power to take the trials in my place

and free the Sanctuary if he signed a magical slave contract that would forever bind him to Roswaal's will."

Anri's eyes were big as hen's eggs. "He... didn't sign it, did he?!"

Emilia shook her head. "No. I... I couldn't let that happen. I would have died before I let that happen!" She almost shouted. "I promised Subaru that I would pass the trials this time and we would get everyone out of the Sanctuary. And Subaru, for some reason, gambled that I could do it..."

"Did you pass?" Anri asked excitedly.

Emilia nodded. "Yes, again thanks to Subaru. Subaru showed me how to pass the trial. I saw my past again but he taught me how I could see it with new eyes. Instead of despising that girl, I... I suddenly pitied her for all the pain that she had been forced to endure."

"What were the other trials like?" Anri asked.

Emilia sighed. "The second trial was a vision of a life that I would have sold my soul to have. All of my loved ones were alive, Subaru and I were safe and free to do nothing except love each other. We even had a baby," Emilia whispered with a sad smile.

Anri smiled, poking at the bubbling potion. "That sounds wonderful, Emilia."

Emilia nodded. "I wanted to stay there forever but Subaru... the real Subaru, needed me so I left," Emilia took a deep breath and shook her head. "The last trial was my worst fear."

"Wait, what do you mean 'your worst fear?'" Victoire asked sharply.

Emilia stared off into the distance with haunted eyes. "The magic brought to life the worst thing I could possibly imagine. A horror that made me want to lose my mind. The magic reached into my soul and dug out my absolute worst nightmare and made me face it. I barely got through that trial with my sanity intact..."

"I don't get it," Victoire said, shaking her head.

Emilia put up her hands. "Please, I... I don't want to get into the details," She murmured.

"Sure!" Anri said quickly, casting a reproachful look at Victoire.

Victoire sighed and rolled her eyes, tossing her beret into the air and catching it.

"But you did manage to pass the trials in the end, right?" Anri asked.

Emilia nodded. "We barely escaped ahead of the Sin Archbishops but we did get away."

"Wow! That's an amazing story, Emilia!" Anri said excitedly. "You must have been thrilled! You really were a hero! You proved everything to Subaru that you wanted to prove!"

Emilia didn't answer right away. Finally, she sighed. "Then we discovered that somehow, inexplicably, our lives had gotten even worse."

"Worse?! How could things have gotten worse?!" Anri asked in shock.

Emilia sighed. "After we left the Sanctuary, I discovered that I had been cursed and nobody could remember who I was."

"...What?" Anri replied.

"No one could remember who I was," Emilia repeated. "My father. Subaru's adopted sister. All of our friends. Everyone acted like they'd never met me before. Subaru was the only person who even remembered who I was. Everyone else simply assumed that I had put an enchantment on Subaru to trick him into thinking that he knew me. Everyone's memories had been edited so that they only remembered Subaru as a candidate for the throne.

"Because everyone thought that I was a witch, Subaru and I had to run for our lives. We traveled with my father and his sister for a time," Emilia said sadly. "But my father now despised me for putting Subaru in danger by my mere presence. Finally, our friends tracked us down and were ready to kill me. Subaru and I got away but Beatrice and Daddy... they didn't..."

Emilia stared sadly down at the floor.

Anri scratched her chin thoughtfully. "Hey, Emilia, you say that you were cursed and that nobody can remember you?"

Emilia nodded. "Even my own father doesn't remember who I am. All his memories of me were either erased or the magic changed them so that Subaru was inserted into my place."

Anri shook her head. "I've never even *heard* of a curse like that."

Emilia sighed. "Neither had I. We think that the Witch Cult might have placed the curse on me."

Anri thought for a moment. "Victoire, have you ever heard of something like this?"

Victoire shook her head. "Nah. But I never wasted my time studying curses. Or the Witch Cult. I'm guessing that your Grandpa would be the best person to ask."

"Your grandfather?" Emilia asked.

Anri nodded. "Yeah, my grandfather is a Patriarch of the Gusteko Holy Church. He serves as the caretaker of the Grand Archives. When my parents died, he told me that he considered becoming the regent since my brother and I were too young to ascend the throne and he could easily gain the approval of all the nobles to land the job. But it would have meant giving up his seat in the Hierocracy. Luckily, my Uncle agreed to become regent so my Grandfather didn't have to."

"What are the Grand Archives?" Emilia asked.

Anri smirked. "They're the collective knowledge of the Holy Church! It's by *far* the largest repository of books anywhere in the world. We've even got books on the Old Kingdom!" Anri said in a proud voice. "My family has guarded and protected the Archives since long before anyone can remember."

"Old Kingdom?" Emilia asked.

"Yeah! The Grand Archives contains lots of books and other materials dating from the Old Kingdom. They're all considered to be treasured artifacts by my family. My Grandfather has spent his entire life studying these relics."

"I'm sorry, Anri, but what *is* the Old Kingdom?" Emilia asked awkwardly.

Anri gave her a strange look.

Emilia blushed. "I'm afraid that I'm not very well educated," Emilia admitted. "I've never heard this term before."

"Hm," Anri thought for a moment. "That's probably not your fault, Mili. I don't think that Lagunica likes to discuss the Old Kingdom very much. From what I've heard, Lagunica likes to pretend that it's a kingdom that has endured for thousands of years," She said mockingly.

Emilia frowned. "Hasn't it? I thought that the records of the Lion Kings go back fifteen hundred years before the Great Calamity."

Anri snickered. "Well yeah, I heard that they do but I don't have much faith in those writings as historical records. I remember reading a little about the early Lion Kings of Lagunica during my studies. Aker son of Atum and the rest seem more like mythological fables than actual history. I sort of have my doubts that the first Lion King actually fought a river with his bare hands or that he trapped the four winds in a bag until they agreed to serve him."

"Perhaps he was a great sorcerer," Emilia suggested.

"Maybe," Anri allowed. "But it seems more likely that the story is intended to be read as an allegory. Like the legends that claim that the ancient Sun King carved the Great Dragons from mountains and smokeless fire. We lost a great deal of knowledge of our history during the Great Calamity. We only have scattered remnants to pick over and it's not really clear how much of it we should take literally."

"Why would we lose all that knowledge?" Emilia asked.

Anri looked at her Emilia. Her usually cheerful demeanor had grown somber. "Emilia, how much do you know about the Great Calamity?"

"It's when the Witch of Envy destroyed most of the world," Emilia said promptly.

Anri chuckled. "Very good, Emilia. You get a gold star! But what do you think that catastrophe was like?"

Emilia thought for a moment and then answered, "Scary?"

"Yeah, that's not quite what I meant, Mili," Anri chuckled. "My grandfather told me that the Witch of Envy's campaign against the world lasted for years. Even a witch takes a very long time to destroy a whole world."

"And then she was sealed away?" Emilia asked.

"Yup. The Sword Saint, the Sage, and the Divine Dragon joined forces to seal the Witch away after they discovered that they couldn't kill her. They gathered the greatest army this world had ever seen to fight off the witch's abominations and monsters while they finally sealed away the witch. But what do you think happened after the battle?"

Emilia frowned. "They... threw a party?"

Anri shook her head. "They cared for their wounded and buried their dead. The death toll of that battle is believed to have been in the hundreds of thousands and we can't even guess how many might have been injured. Then the survivors left to face a far greater emergency."

"Greater than the witch?" Emilia asked skeptically.

"Yes. They'd stripped the lands of every able bodied man and woman to fight the war and they'd left the fields untended. Winter was coming and there was no food. They managed to eke their way through that terrible winter but only by emptying every storehouse on the continent. After that, they discovered that they had lost so many people during the war that when springtime came around, there weren't enough young and healthy people left to plant new

crops. The majority of people who hadn't participated in that great battle were mostly cripples, the elderly or the very young. In other words, the people who couldn't help grow and harvest crops far outnumbered the remaining people who could. The result was famine and plague. For a full century, the only concern on the continent was food. The swords were exchanged for shovels and the proud war steeds were hitched to plows. Worse, most of the lands that the armies had been drawn from had been destroyed or forced under the sea by the witch. The world was a fraction of the size that it had been before her rampage. These men had nowhere to return to and had to find new places for themselves. They tried to seek help from the rulers of the remaining lands but those potentates didn't have enough food for their own people! They couldn't take in refugees. The armies broke down and many formed roaming bands of brigands desperately searching for places to live and food to eat."

Emilia shook her head in disbelief. "Nothing like that ever happened in any of the other fairy tales that I've read," Emilia commented.

Anri chuckled. "Yeah, because those were only stories, Mili," Anri murmured. "This really happened. My grandfather told me that during the chaos following the sealing of the witch, all kinds of knowledge was lost. Elders starved or took sick or were killed in the fighting. Whole libraries were burned."

"So... what was the Old Kingdom like?" Emilia asked.

"We don't know."

"Huh?" Emilia replied.

Anri shrugged. "We don't know what the old world was like, not really. Was there really a Kingdom called Lagunica before the Great Calamity? Did the line of the Lion Kings actually extend for a thousand years? Or is all of this just myth? We have barely any records of what kingdoms existed before the Great Calamity or what they were like. We use the term 'Old Kingdom' as a catch-all for whatever existed before the Great Calamity. My grandfather is one of the world's foremost experts on the Old Kingdom and he would be the first to tell you that the little knowledge we do have of the old world is vague and often contradicted by other works."

Emilia thought for a moment. "Anri, you said that the Grand Archives has books on this subject?"

"Of course! The Grand Archives has books on almost every subject you can imagine and probably dozens that you can't!" Anri said proudly. "They're the treasure hoard of my family! They have books on everything from medicine to battle strategies to hair dressing! They even have books from the days when the witches still walked the land!"

Emilia took a deep breath. "Anri, do you think I might be able to find more information about my curse in the Archives? Maybe even a cure?"

Anri hesitated. "Well, I can't say for sure but I do know that if you could find information on it anywhere in the world then I'm sure that you could find it there," She admitted slowly. "I could give you access on my authority as Princess but getting back to Siros right now would be... complicated."

"What do you mean?"

"Our lands are under attack," Anri said somberly. "I'm not even sure how *I'm* going to get home."

Victoire scoffed. "I'll get you home, Princess! You just trust this amazingly beautiful lady to steer you around the corners!" She boasted.

Anri sighed. "I really admire your confidence, Victoire," She said with a faint smile.

Emilia looked at Anri sympathetically. "Maybe Subaru can help. If he thinks that we might learn how to lift my curse, I'm sure that he'd be happy to help you get back home."

Anri smiled at her. "Now that's a deal! You guys get me back to Siros and you can browse around in the Archives to your heart's content. If there's any reference to your curse in the Archives, Emilia, my grandfather will know about it."

Anri paused in stirring the potion. "Come to think of it, I wish that Hunnicutt was here right now," She murmured.

"That was your friend, right?" Emilia asked.

Anri sighed. "He wasn't my friend. He was one of my House's Shadows. I barely knew him, unfortunately. But I liked him. And he told me that his area of study had included the Witch Cult. He might have been able to answer some of your questions, Emilia."

"What is a 'Shadow?'" Emilia asked.

"The Shadows, like Victoire," Anri gestured toward the bored woman sitting at the table, "Are my family's secret service. They're trained in stealth, information gathering, and infiltration. They also keep my families secrets and some work as our bodyguards," Anri explained.

"And Hunnicutt was infiltrating the Witch Cult?" Emilia asked in disbelief.

Anri chuckled. "No. I'm not sure that the Witch Cult has ever been infiltrated successfully. He *studied* them. Or his study included them anyway. In addition to their field training, each Shadow spends years studying in the Grand Archives. It's a tradition and it's believed to increase their intelligence and insight, right, Victoire?"

Victoire looked pained. "Please, don't bring me back there. I'm a field operative not a bookworm. All that studying made me want to fucking scream," Victoire said flatly.

Anri snickered. "Why? What was your area of study?"

"The Lagunican royal family, Princess," Victoire rolled her eyes. "I spent years learning every stupid ancestor's name and every stupid thing that they ever did in their stupid fucking lives. And now they're all gone and all that studying is fucking useless!"

Anri burst out laughing. "Yeah I guess that would be pretty frustrating. I needed to study all of the Ithil family history myself. Most of it was pretty boring," She admitted. "But at least they were *my* relatives so that made it a bit more interesting."

"What was Hunnicutt studying?" Emilia asked.

"Prospective Shadows spend years studying in the Grand Archives. They can't become real Shadows until they achieve mastery over at least one subject. Hunnicutt spent close to three years studying tiny and obscure scraps of Old Kingdom knowledge, attempting to glean new insight from them. He wrote his dissertation on the small fragments that we have of three different plays written in the Old Kingdom just before the Great Calamity."

"They were about the Witch Cult?" Emilia asked in surprise.

"Oh no. They had nothing to do with the Witch Cult."

"Anri, I thought you said-"

"The three plays each have a soliloquy where a character is *compared* to a Witch Cultist, usually in the context expounding on the character's betrayal of the main character. Each play has nothing to do with the Witch Cult other than that analogy. Hunnicutt spend three years writing a dissertation on their meaning," Anri replied.

Emilia looked confused. "Anri, I don't understand. Why would it be noteworthy that the villain of a play is compared to a Witch Cultist?"

"Well, the plays don't compare the *villain* to the Witch Cult. In each case, it's a flawed friend of the protagonist who's being compared to the Witch Cult. Someone who, through accident or character flaw, has betrayed the hero and now the hero must suffer for it."

Emilia thought for a moment and then shook her head. "I still don't understand."

Anri chuckled. "Yeah, honestly I didn't understand it either at first. But Hunnicutt talked a lot about it while we were fleeing. Looking back on it, I think he just wanted to distract me so I wouldn't be scared. Hunnicutt's big insight dealt with the concept of 'betrayal.' The fact that these plays, which were written about different topics and by different people all associated the Witch Cult with *betrayal* suggests that the connection between the two was fairly prevalent in society at that time. Hunnicutt's dissertation essentially boiled down to: 'You can't be double-crossed by an enemy.' The fact that people viewed the Witch Cult's actions during the Great Calamity as a 'betrayal,' strongly suggested to him that the relationship between society and the Witch Cult at that time must have been different than what we think of today."

"Yeah, that's all really fascinating," Victoire sighed, sounding bored.

Anri gave her an annoyed look before continuing. "Hunnicutt went so far as to speculate that the Witch Cult was openly tolerated in the Old Kingdom or perhaps even admired," Anri's voice was fond as she recalled her fallen companion. "He told me that the chairman of his dissertation committee was my Grandfather. Hunnicutt told me that Grandfather told him that his conclusion was mad. But Grandfather admitted that Hunnicutt had made several cogent points even if his conclusion was bonkers. Grandfather said that it was common knowledge that the Witch Cult before the time of the Great Calamity would have been far more powerful than the dregs that we see today. He said that as a result of this, the Witch Cult must have been far more feared at the time and likely far more influential. So Grandfather accepted his dissertation and voted for him to become a Shadow."

"Dregs?!" Victoire said incredulously. "Do you know what they're doing to Lagunica right now? Do you know what will happen to this kingdom if they turn north when they're finished?!"

"Anri," Emilia said in a similar tone. "Have you ever met a Sin Archbishop? They are *terrifyingly* powerful! Subaru barely escaped from combat with them with his life!"

Anri shrugged. "Well, I don't know much about them, Mili. I'm just repeating what I've been told. My Grandfather *is* an expert though. He once told me that the power of the Archbishops in no way compares to the power of the Witches. He said that if the seven Witches of Sin walked the land today then the Witch Cult would control this entire world."

Victoire threw her beret into the air and caught it. "Hey, any chance that we could talk about something else? Like literally *anything* more pleasant?" Victoire grumbled. "I realize that we're currently squatting in an abandoned dump in the ass-end of Sanshi territory but there still must be something nicer to talk about than the motherfucking Witches of Sin!"

Anri pulled the pot off the fire. "Actually, I think that we're done talking for the moment. Emilia, I believe that your medicine is ready."

Emilia sprang up. "Really?"

Anri brought the pot over to the table and set it down. Emilia looked inside the pot where the medicine seemed to have boiled down to a dry, gray powder.

Anri bustled over to the enormous spice rack and pulled out a bottle of some vibrant green oil.

"Everyone brace yourselves!" Anri warned as she brought the bottle to the pot.

"For what?" Emilia asked as Anri poured the oil over the powder.

The dust started to steam intensely. Huge clouds of white steam filled the room.

Emilia jumped back gagging and trying not to vomit at the intensely foul odor.

Victoire bent double, coughing and hacking. "Oh my fucking god, that smells vile! That smells worse than the time I had to escape a town by crawling through a fucking sewage tunnel!" She staggered slowly out of the kitchen and went outside of the church where she was noisily sick.

"Gah!" Anri cringed, desperately fanning the air and trying to clear the clouds of steam. "I swear that this potion smells worse every single time I make it!"

"Anri, what is this?!" Emilia asked as the steam slowly began to clear the room.

"The medicine," Anri said, choking and trying not to throw up.

Anri grabbed a small measuring glass and carefully poured some of the medicine into it.

Emilia looked into the pot. The formally gray powder had combined with the green oil to produce a yellowy-green concoction with the consistency of melted butter and a powerful odor. "Anri, are you *sure* that this won't kill him?" She asked dubiously.

Anri gave her an amused glance as she handed Emilia the glass. "Here. Give this to Subaru. It won't taste very good but make sure that he drinks it all. If he's still unconscious, you may need to help him sit up and drink it."

Emilia's eyes filled with tears. "Thank you so much!"

Anri waved her gratitude aside then grabbed her stomach as she almost threw up. She gave Emilia a weak smile. "Hey, it's the least that I owe you! I hope that he feels better soon. This medicine will force the Black Water's witchcraft out of him. The purification is a very traumatic process for the body. He'll likely sleep for several hours. Encourage him to do that. The less he's conscious through the process the better!"

Force out the witchcraft? What will that do to Subaru's Authority?

Might the potion get rid of it? That... isn't necessarily a bad thing but what if the potion reacts violently with Subaru because he has so much witchcraft in him? Could it damage him or put him into shock?

...I have to take the chance. That poison will absolutely kill Subaru. If there's any chance that this medicine will save him, I have to take it.

Anri looked out the door to where they could hear Victoire still coughing and throwing up. "I think I better check on Victoire," Anri said somberly. "And maybe do a little throwing up myself... When Grandfather taught me and a few other students how to make this potion, we all threw up so much that we almost passed out!" Anri walked to the door, looking nauseous and dry-heaving repeatedly.

Emilia nodded and started to leave the kitchen, walking slowly to avoid spilling a drop.

She had to pause repeatedly during her walk as her stomach did somersaults because of the foul aroma.

Emilia walked back into Subaru's bedroom. The sun was just setting. She saw Subaru lying there unconscious, his face drawn and miserable.

"Subaru, the medicine is ready," She whispered, putting the glass on a nearby night table. She sat down on the bed beside him. "Let me help you up."

Subaru whimpered as she gently pulled him upright. Emilia could feel the heat of the venom through the sheets, burning like a furnace. It appeared to have started to spread through the left side of his torso.

She picked up the glass. "Here, Subaru. Drink," She whispered, holding the glass up to his lips.

She poured extremely slowly so that Subaru only got a few drops at a time.

Each sip made Subaru gag and his body spasmed.

Emilia bit her lip. "I know that it tastes bad, Subaru, but it's medicine. Please drink it," She urged.

Subaru made no sign that he was even aware of her presence.

It seemed to take forever. The unconscious Subaru struggled to swallow it and keep it down. Twice he almost threw up but barely managed to force it back. Finally, the medicine was all gone and Subaru lay crumpled against Emilia's

shoulder, looking absolutely spent.

Emilia helped him lie down. He was panting for breath.

Emilia gently kissed his forehead. "Try to sleep, Subaru. Anri says that you need your rest, alright?"

Subaru sighed but Emilia wasn't sure if he had heard her.

"You're safe, Subaru. Nothing can hurt you as long as I'm here," She soothed. "I promise that I'll take good care of you. Promises are important and I must keep my promises."

Emilia just sat beside his bed for a time, watching him sleep. He was dreaming but he flinched and writhed in his dreams.

Oh, please get better Subaru...

She laid down beside him and went to sleep.

Emilia woke up hours later. She glanced out the bedroom window and realized that the sun would rise soon.

Subaru was fast asleep.

Emilia climbed off the bed and tucked Subaru in. He was still moaning but he wasn't writhing around as much.

Emilia lifted the covers and looked at Subaru's body. The yellowish brown color that had been spreading through his body hadn't moved much during the night. It had also darkened to a more orange hue.

I hope that's a good sign... At least he seems to be breathing easier.

Emilia kissed him gently and then went back to the kitchen.

"Hey, Princess," Victoire said, sitting at the table. "Look, I hate to be a nag but we gotta get the fuck out of here, *today*. If there's *any* chance that Malcolm an Griest knows about the safe-houses then he's going to be knocking them over one by one until he sees you come crawling out from under one!"

"Yeah, leave and go where?" Anri sighed. "If this safe-house is compromised, shouldn't we assume that all the others aren't safe either?"

"Yeah, probably," She admitted. "Look, maybe we should just return to Siros. Your people fucking need you!"

Anri hesitated. "Look, I agree that we should probably go home but how can we even get there? There's an entire army between us! We even have assassins and bounty hunters trying to catch us on the road."

"I can handle that, Princess, don't you worry," Victoire said confidently. "The Shadows take roads that nobody else knows about. This amazing lady will get you home safe and sound. Just don't expect it to be a fun fucking trip. When we get back to Siros, you-"

Victoire stopped talking as Emilia entered the kitchen. She gave the elf a chill look.

"Oh!" Anri said turning to look at Emilia with a broad smile. "Good morning, Emilia! We made some toast for you if you're hungry."

Emilia nodded. "Thank you," She said sitting down at the table. She spread some butter on a slice of toasted bread and ate it.

Ironically, this is the best meal that I've had all week.

I just wish that Subaru could share it with me...

"How's our patient?" Anri asked.

Emilia hesitated. "I... don't know," She admitted. "He... doesn't seem to be any worse at least."

Anri nodded. "You might not think it but that's a *very* good sign that the medicine is working. If the medicine hadn't taken effect, he never would have made it through the night."

Emilia stared at her in horror.

Anri flushed and chuckled nervously. "Oh, right. Maybe I shouldn't have shared that. But the point is that Subaru is almost certainly recovering. I'll go take a look at him."

Anri got up from the table and went back toward the bedroom.

Emilia wolfed down her bread and followed Anri.

Victoire didn't move but Emilia felt the woman's eyes boring into her back.

Anri knelt on the bed next to the unconscious Subaru.

"Morning, Subaru," Anri murmured. "How are we feeling?"

She peeled back one of his eye lids.

The eye seemed to focus on her momentarily and then rolled away.

"Alright!" Anri approved. "Those black veins from yesterday are all gone. He's definitely on the mend."

Anri pulled up the covers to inspect his body. "The venom doesn't seem to be spreading any further," She said. "His arm is still in bad shape but that just needs some healing magic to repair the muscle and the damaged flesh."

"Can you do that?" Emilia asked intently.

Anri nodded. "Yeah it will just take a day or two. I know that his arm looks really bad but trust me, the damage looks a lot worse than it actually is. Subaru doesn't need a master healer. Just a competent one. So I'll try to pretend that I qualify," Anri said in a tone of self-mockery.

Emilia looked at her. "Anri, you saved his life. You're a wonderful healer. I am... forever in your debt," She bowed her head.

Anri chuckled. "Let's just call it even, shall we? You did save my life after all. Hell, you probably *both* saved my life. The Black Water would have devastated the entire region before it was stopped."

Anri and Emilia tucked Subaru back into bed.

They both sat on the edge of the bed for a moment. Anri looked at her. "I hope that you're feeling better, Mili. I can't imagine what you went through last night."

Emilia took a deep breath and let it out. "I thought that I was going to lose him. I thought that he was going to die and that it would be all my fault. Subaru got hurt protecting me. Again."

"But he isn't dying," Anri said with a reassuring smile. "He's going to be just fine."

Emilia sighed. "We had a screaming argument before we met the Black Water."

Anri coughed. "Yeah, I heard. Not the specifics, I mean. But I could hear the shouting. I'm guessing that most of the forest could."

Emilia flinched. "I said... terrible things to him."

"Emilia, why did you tell him to leave?"

Emilia didn't answer right away. Finally she bowed her head and sighed. "Anri," Emilia said patiently. "Subaru was devastated by the loss of Beatrice and Puck. His *friends* even turned against him and it was all because of me. If he left me behind and just went back to the capitol... he could get everything back. It's just... the right thing to do. It's best for Subaru, for his friends, it's even the best thing to do for the world. You know what kind of man Subaru is. He could be a King! He could literally change this entire world. How can I ask him to abandon all that and run away with me? How can I ask him to waste his life hiding with me in a tiny cottage in a cursed forest?" She murmured.

Anri seemed to weigh her answer carefully. "Emilia, you *didn't* ask him to run away with you. He just did it."

"So?" Emilia muttered.

"Emilia, listen, there is a very big difference between *asking* someone to sacrifice for you and *letting* them sacrifice for you. They aren't even close to the same thing."

"I don't know, Anri," Emilia said. "They come to the same thing in the end, don't they?"

"Shouldn't Subaru get a choice in this?" Anri asked gently. "It's his life after all. How does he want to spend it? Did you ever ask him?"

Emilia shook her head. "You don't understand, Anri. I can't just... ask him how he feels about this."

"Why not?"

Emilia sighed. "Anri... Subaru is so kind and caring. He would never tell me that he regretted meeting me. I know that Subaru would *never* abandon me... no matter... how much he might want to..."

"You think that he *wants* to abandon you?" Anri asked incredulously. "If you're worried about that, why didn't you ever talk to him about it?"

Emilia wept silently. "I'm just... I'm afraid that someday he'll wake up and realize that being with me could never make up for everything that he gave up for the sake of being with me. That he'll hate me for holding him back."

Anri chuckled.

Emilia looked at her in shock.

"Look, I'm real sorry, Mili," Anri said with a knowing smile. "But I just can't take these kind of fears seriously. I've known Subaru for about three days and he's been unconscious for at least one of them. And even *I* know Subaru well enough to say that he'll never give up on you. I can't promise you that your love is going to be eternal and that everything will work out. Nobody can promise that. Love is difficult and even with both people trying as hard as they can, sometimes things just don't work out the way you'd like. But I am certain that he'd never regret trying to make it work or regret the time he spent with you."

Emilia's mouth moved but she didn't say anything.

"That boy loves you, Emilia," Anri said confidently. "He loves you as truly as anyone I've ever met. And for the sake of that love alone, I'd follow you two into the dragon's den."

Emilia blinked. "Dragon's den?" Emilia said in confusion.

Anri flinched. "Oh, right. That... doesn't make sense in this context," She mumbled.

"I don't understand."

Anri looked pained. "Um. So, it's just *possible* I was quoting some lines from one of my favorite romance novels..."

Emilia covered her face and sighed.

"Hey! It's still good advice!" Anri protested.

Emilia shook her head in resignation.

"Look," Anri urged. "Let's go finish breakfast. Subaru should wake up in a couple of hours. Then we can all plan our next moves."

"Next moves?" Emilia asked.

Anri shrugged, standing up. "Yeah. Victoire and me need to find our way back to Siros. I'm not sure what you and Subaru want to do next but I'll try to help you as far as I'm able. I certainly owe you that much."

"As far as I'm concerned," Emilia said, following Anri out of the room. "We're in debt to *you*, Anri. Whatever struggles that you're facing, if there's any way that we can assist you, I'll do whatever I can to help and I'm sure that Subaru will feel the same way."

The pair returned to the kitchen and found Victoire sitting there like a statue.

She glowered at Emilia.

Anri quickly noticed the tension between the women and sighed. "Victoire, do we have any more toast? I'm sure that Emilia is still hungry after the week she's had."

There was a knock at the door.

Anri gave Victoire a confused look. "Could it be another Shadow?!"

Victoire shrugged as she got to her feet with a confused expression on her face. "I don't know! Maybe?"

Anri approached the door and put her ear to it. "Who is it?" She asked slowly.

"Natalie," A voice replied.

Anri looked at Victoire with excitement. She slowly opened the door and then gasped.

Emilia watched Anri quickly scramble away from the door, her face pale and her eyes wide with horror.

A figure stepped through the doorway.

Emilia's mind went blank and then filled with countless images of Subaru lying helplessly on the ground like a broken doll. A huge pool of blood spreading out around his shattered body as everyone desperately tried to staunch the bleeding. His pale face drawn and twisted in pain as he struggled to hold onto his fading life while Emilia stood by helplessly.

"Why hello there, Kairei," Elsa said pleasantly. "It's lovely to see you again. I've been looking for you."

***Chapter 18*: Chapter 18**

Subaru's whole body ached and throbbed. Shadows and nightmares followed his weary soul wherever it roamed. Subaru was exhausted and his mind struggled to give into the oblivion of true, deep sleep but something forced his mind to continue on and it drifted from restless dream to restless dream.

Subaru found himself sitting on the bed in Emilia's cottage. Emilia sat beside him stroking a happy Puck while Beatrice sat on his lap reading self-importantly from a book.

A moment later, the cottage door burst apart in flames. Reinhard van Astrea stood there, the Dragon Sword in hand.

"The Witch must die!" He proclaimed as the flames from Reinhard's blow engulfed the walls of the cottage.

Subaru leapt forward to protect his family. He tried to face Reinhard but the flames consumed the cottage as if it were made of kindling.

Subaru frantically tried to reach his family but he moved as if he was wading in hip deep mud. Subaru watched helplessly as they all withered in the flames.

Elsa stood there in a formfitting outfit that exposed a great deal of cleavage. She wore tights and a red cape was draped behind her.

Elsa smiled calmly. "Your friends were most amusing to play with, Princess. They did *not* want to tell me where you were."

Anri's eyes darted around the room, looking for an escape that wasn't there.

Anri drew herself up imperiously. The girl forced her mouth into a grim line. "Look, if you were expecting me to *beg* for my life, Elsa, then I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you," Anri snarled even as tears streamed from her eyes. "I'll show you how a princess can die!"

"Oh good!" Elsa said approvingly. "This should be fun! I don't get to fondle young entrails like yours very often. I'm sure that they'll be most soft and supple. I'm very curious as to what color they'll be."

Anri's face remained defiant but her cheeks were ashen.

"Princess! Run away!" Victoire shouted, drawing a short sword from her belt and sprinting to stand in front of Anri. "I'll hold this cunt off!"

Elsa smiled kindly at Victoire.

Before Victoire could even blink, Elsa was close enough to kiss her, wearing a sweet smile on her face. Victoire recoiled in shock and Elsa dealt her a wicked slash with her daggers.

Victoire went flying and crashed against the wall. She looked down at herself in horror, placing her hands over the wound.

Emilia barely noticed. Her attention was riveted on one thing. "Elsa," Emilia grated, remembering the beautiful killer's face from a dozen nightmares.

Elsa cocked her head, looking puzzled. "Have we met?"

"You tried to kill my Subaru!" Emilia roared.

"*Tried* to?" Elsa repeated with a frown. "That's not good. I do so try to be thorough. I'll have to look him up after I finish here."

Elsa's eyes widened. "Wait a moment. A silver haired half-elf? You must be the girl that Mother Capella is looking for! And that means... Oh! Your friend must be the one that made Mother Capella so angry! She'll be delighted when I bring her his entrails. This is a very happy day."

Emilia clenched her jaw until she was afraid that it would snap. "You will never lay a *finger* on my Subaru ever again!" Emilia screamed. She raised her hands and flung a blizzard of razor-sharp ice crystals at Elsa.

Elsa pulled her cape across her body. The crystals shattered harmlessly against it.

Emilia gaped at Elsa.

Elsa drew her other dagger. "My cloak protects me from magic, little elf. You could probably buy a mansion for what it cost to make. It was a gift from an employer so that I could kill..." Elsa paused with a frown as if searching her memory.

Her smile returned with a shrug. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. The point is that now that I have my special cloak, I can play with mages too! Are you ready to play, little elf?"

Emilia bit her lip and extended her arm. She concentrated and a long, slender sword made of ice grew in her hand.

Elsa smiled. "Oh my, this *will* be fun," She proclaimed.

In his dream, Subaru stood in the courtyard of the slaver camp. His body was a pillar of pure ecstasy as it absorbed the endless energy from his unlocked Authority.

Osril knelt in front of his cringing men. He was still completely naked and abjectly begging for mercy.

Subaru sighed. "Was not my own very good justice sufficient for you the first time? Need I now subject myself to dealing with you worthless wretches again?"

Osril blubbered on his knees.

Subaru shook his head. "Enough of this. You have wasted too much of my time and you are not worth the waste. Draw your swords now."

As one the bandits all drew their weapons whimpering in fear.

"Now bring your blades across your necks. Expeditiously please, I have better things to do today than deal with you lot."

The bandits all wept piteously as they followed Subaru's direction and slit their own throats. The men blubbered as one by one the fell to the ground in a pile of corpses and a spreading pool of blood.

Osril kept his head down, blubbering on his knees.

Subaru regarded Osril. "It might interest you to know that if you stood face to face with my Apostle, she would have pronounced you guiltless of your crimes as you in fact *feel* no guilt." Subaru wasn't certain himself what he was talking about. "You genuinely feel no responsibility nor remorse for your many crimes and deprivations. This is quite remarkable to me, albeit not at all laudatory. This is proof positive of my superiority to my Apostle as I feel no need to rely on such external validation as your personal sense of guilt. My own good judgment shall suffice. You are guilty because I *say* you are guilty and therefore, you shall suffer the consequences."

Subaru gently touched the man's head and Osril's body instantly crumbled into thousands of tiny pieces and a great glut of blood.

Subaru stared with distaste at the pile of refuse. He glanced behind him and saw the group of slaves standing there, barely dressed and shivering in terror.

"Are... Are you our new owner?" Ellen cringed.

"Indeed I am," Subaru replied. "You have betrayed my trust and reported my location to mine enemies and I shall give you long toil to repent of that mistake. You shall labor and strive to fulfill my visions for this world and in the fullness of time perhaps I shall yet forgive you and permit you your freedom. Until that day, know that you live and die by my will. Be grateful that you serve no lesser man, possessed of lesser judgment."

The slaves all nodded, mutely accepting his punishment as their due.

Subaru marched off without even glancing behind him, taking it as a given that his slaves would follow him no matter where he led.

Emilia tried to fling another torrent of ice crystals at Elsa but once again, they all shattered against her cloak. Elsa leaped toward her with her knives extended.

Emilia barely dodged Elsa's slashing knives and retaliated with a sword thrust that made the assassin jump back.

Emilia had no idea how to use a sword but her mana made her inhumanly fast and agile.

"Anri! Get back!" Victoire shouted, yanking Anri away from the fighting. Victoire struggled to keep her hand pressed against her stomach wound as she pulled Anri out of the kitchen and down the hall.

Emilia's field of vision was dyed red. She'd never felt like this before. All she wanted to do was to kill the Bowel Hunter.

I'll never forget the horrors of that night. How broken and helpless Subaru seemed. The huge pool of blood spreading out around his body. The deep hole that I saw ripped in his side. How the healers all warned me that there wasn't much that they could do for him and that I should brace myself for the worst...

I remember how I knew that if he died, it would be all my fault. I'd brought him along on my hunt for the insignia and Subaru was attacked by Elsa because of me. He got hurt explicitly because he pushed me out of the way of Elsa's knives.

He wanted to save me. He wanted me to live more than he wanted to live...

I couldn't understand it. Why would anyone do that for someone that they just met? Especially for me?

I was terrified that Subaru was going to die. I was scared that he'd die without my ever getting a chance to thank him for what he'd done. Or even getting the chance to try to understand why he'd done it...

"Oh my, you're fun," Elsa said casually. "I haven't enjoyed myself this much in years. Is your friend this much fun? I wonder what color his guts will be."

Emilia snarled and lunged at Elsa.

Elsa parried Emilia's sword with one hand and thrust the other at her stomach.

Emilia jumped back and found herself in the doorway of the church. Emilia warily took a few steps outside, trying to draw Elsa away from Subaru and the others.

Elsa had a serene smile on her face as she sauntered out into the cool morning air. "I really hope that you're not giving up and running away yet, little elf. I'd be so disappointed. Then again, if you really wanted a head start, I suppose that I

can amuse myself with your little friends for a time before I come after you."

Emilia hissed at her. "You will touch Subaru over my dead body!" Emilia was dimly aware that some of the villagers had come out to see what the commotion was all about. Most remained huddled in their homes, fretfully peering out of their tiny windows.

"Splendid! It's a deal!" Elsa said, twirling her knives. "Do you know that I've never killed an elf before? I wonder how soft your entrails will be. And of course, when I'm done with you, I still have your friends and all these villagers to play with."

Emilia scowled at Elsa. "You disgusting-"

Elsa didn't change expression as she threw one of her knives at Emilia.

Emilia barely dodged it and the knife embedded itself up to the hilt, quivering in the side of a nearby house.

Elsa just got rid of one of her own weapons! Now maybe I can-

Elsa made a beckoning gesture and the knife jerked out of the wood and flew back to her hand as if it was tied to a string.

Emilia gaped at Elsa.

Elsa smiled at Emilia. "My knives are enchanted too," She shrugged.

Subaru found himself in another dream.

Subaru and Emilia were walking in the forest, surrounded by a horde of ferocious mabeasts. Instead of being afraid, Emilia walked calmly beside a Guiltylowe, petting it as it were a house cat. The Guiltylowe was as docile as a kitten under her hand.

Subaru watched this in bemusement until he felt an unsettling sensation. He felt the Authority of Pride surge from deep inside of him and this time it swallowed him whole.

Subaru looked at Emilia in disappointment. "Emilia, I have done for you all that I can. I have attempted to give you time to grow and change in the fervent hope that you would defy my expectations and become a consort worthy of me. Alas, my considerable patience is now exhausted. It was your foolishness that cost me my friends and Beatrice."

Emilia gave Subaru such a broken hearted expression that Subaru just wanted to cry and beg her forgiveness but the Authority of Pride drove him on.

Subaru shook his head. "You know what I must do."

Emilia nodded sadly. "Subaru, I'm so sorry that I let you down."

"As well you should be," Subaru agreed.

He made a gesture and the formerly tame Guiltylowe turned on Emilia with razor sharp teeth, sinking its fangs into her arm. The other Guiltylowe and the pack of wolgarms all raced into the feeding frenzy to gather up whatever scraps they could find.

Emilia screamed and begged for mercy but Subaru only shook his head in disappointment.

The massive Snow Blight muscled through the crowd to get his own piece of the remains of Subaru's lover and Subaru could only scream silently as the dream version of Subaru watched the entire procedure with disdainful annoyance.

The forest floor broke open beneath him and Subaru fell into an endless void, screaming as he plunged into nothingness. Looking up, all he could see was the mabeasts ripping what remained of Emilia to bloody pieces as he desperately begged them to stop.

Elsa threw her knives toward Emilia and dashed toward her at the same time. Emilia dodged the daggers and tried to stab Elsa. But the daggers flew back to Elsa's hands and she effortlessly parried Emilia's clumsy sword stroke. Emilia had to throw herself backwards to avoid a knife thrust to her stomach.

Emilia landed on her back. She opened her eyes to see Elsa's daggers flying toward her face.

In desperation, Emilia waved her hand and created a thin wall of ice a few inches in front of her face.

The daggers penetrated the ice and became stuck there.

Elsa retrieved her daggers and smashed the wall with one thrust but Emilia was already on her feet and running around a nearby house.

"Are we playing a new game?" Elsa called in a good-natured voice. "Is it 'hide and seek?'"

Emilia pressed her back against the wall, gasping for breath.

Think, Emilia! Think as fast as you've ever thought before!

Your magic is no good against Elsa as long as she has that cape!

You have your ice sword but you don't stand a chance against Elsa in a sword fight. You're not a sword fighter! You're not any kind of fighter at all! All that you're good for is running around after Subaru and asking him to clean up your messes!

I... I'm really going to die here. Subaru isn't here to save me this time. I'm no match for Elsa. I'm going to die and I'll never even have a chance to tell Subaru how sorry I am for everything that happened...

She's going to kill me. She's going to kill me and poor Anri too...

And then she's going to kill Subaru-

This thought banished all notions of dying and a tremendous rage welled up inside of Emilia.

Stop it, Emilia! Subaru needs you! He needs you to protect him for once! You need to figure out how you're going to deal with Elsa! You can't let Subaru down!

If you can't stop her, then Elsa will kill you. Elsa will go back to the church and-

Emilia stiffened. *Wait. The church...*

"Peek-a-boo! I win!" Elsa cheered.

Emilia threw herself to the ground without even taking the time to look.

This move saved her life. Elsa's daggers slammed into the wall behind her.

Elsa leaped toward her with a joyful smile across her face as Emilia rolled away.

Emilia put everything she had into a spell. She flung a frigid wind at Elsa that was cold enough to shatter metal.

The wind buffeted Elsa but it did no other damage. The stone wall of the house behind Elsa froze solid and then a large portion of the rock cracked and crumbled.

Elsa shook off Emilia's attack but Emilia was already running back toward Anri's church.

Elsa charged off in pursuit.

Subaru fell screaming through an inky black void for what felt like lifetimes. Then slowly, the emptiness began to take form around him. Ghostly images appeared in the darkness around him, like shapes emerging from the mist. He saw faces. Thousands of faces flickered in and out of the void, faces that he had never seen before. They all seemed to be trying to get his attention. He thought that he briefly saw Roswaal but it was gone too fast to be sure. He also thought he might have seen an unmasked Aldebaran but he wasn't sure why the man's face had called Aldebaran to mind, since he'd never seen him without his helmet.

I feel... like a ghost. It's like I'm barely here.

One face came into focus and then grew a body. It was a very unattractive man. He had purple hair and he was painfully thin with gray skin like a living corpse. Despite this, he was dressed in regal finery as he spoke to Subaru. "You shall join with me. You shall become one with me. You shall obey."

Subaru had no idea what the man was talking about and he sensed that he had no mouth to respond with anyway.

"I am the Sin Archbishop of Pride. You are my due and I demand that my rights be respected," The figured continued.

Wait! He's the Archbishop of Pride? Well, how the hell does that work? I thought to be the Archbishop you had to have an Authority. How does he plan to take mine?

Subaru sensed his view turning away from the man and the sickly person faded back into the void, still protesting and demanding his power.

Elsa returned to the church and found Emilia standing guard in the kitchen. At Emilia's request, Anri and Victoire hid in the hallway.

Anri peaked around the corner with wide, terrified eyes.

OK, Emilia. Subaru needs you. This has to work...

"Oh, are we done playing already?" Elsa said sadly, as the women began to circle each other in the kitchen.

Emilia scowled at her. "The playing is over, Elsa!"

She's too close! If she throws those knives again I might not be able to dodge them. But I need her to get closer if this is going to work...

"Oh, no," Elsa disagreed, walking closer. "We're just about to play a new game! I can't wait to find out what your guts feel like!"

"Look out!" Anri screamed while peeking around the corner.

With a smile, Elsa threw one of her knives.

Elsa was too close for Emilia to dodge the knife and the blade embedded itself deep in her left side.

Emilia convulsively dropped her sword. Bereft of her magic, the sword shattered into fragments of ice on the floor.

Elsa charged toward Emilia with a lunatic grin on her face.

Emilia took a deep breath. She was genuinely surprised that she wasn't more terrified.

Emilia raised an empty hand and closed her eyes tight. Elsa's face twisted in confusion. From Emilia's hand, a blinding flash lit up the room.

Elsa staggered.

In one smooth movement, Emilia set herself and leaped toward Elsa. Elsa's momentarily blinded eyes widened in complete shock as she felt Emilia's body crash into hers. Elsa tried to stab her but Emilia was already under her guard.

Emilia tackled Elsa and drove her into the roaring fire where Anri had previously been cooking medicine.

Emilia instantly leaped back out of the fireplace. A quick spell extinguished her singed clothes. Emilia had only a few small burns on her arms.

Elsa's magic cape went up like a torch and the killer rolled out of the fireplace, screaming in pain and tearing off her burning cape. Her formerly smooth, white skin was now covered in painful looking burns and welts.

The magic cloak continued to burn on the floor and in seconds there was nothing left of it but scraps and ash.

For a moment, the two women just stared at one another.

"Elsa," Emilia said in a flat voice. "Your cloak is gone."

Elsa's expression didn't change. Almost too fast to see, Elsa spun around and leaped through the door into the hallway.

Emilia's heart stopped and she raced after her. Emilia turned the corner just in time to see Elsa chase Anri into Subaru's room.

Emilia sprinted after them.

Inside the bedroom, Elsa stood beside the bed with her usual calm smile. Her remaining dagger caressed Anri's throat. Subaru was unconscious in bed and Victoire lay crumpled in a corner, moaning as if Elsa had simply thrown her against the wall.

Anri trembled.

Elsa smiled at Emilia. "Oh, this has been great fun! We had quite the little adventure!" Elsa commented. She paused. "I will miss that cloak though," She mourned.

Emilia glared at the crazed killer as she held her hand tightly against her stomach, trying to staunch the bleeding wound. The knife was still embedded in her side. "Let her go, Elsa. You can still walk out of this place alive... Let Anri go."

Elsa looked thoughtful. "Hm... No, I don't think I," Elsa mused. "What if we make a deal? I'll let her go if you let me open your guts."

Emilia stiffened.

"Don't listen to her!" Anri hissed. "She won't let any of us go, she'll kill all of us! That's what she does! She-" Anri broke off with a cry of pain as Elsa twisted her arm. Anri squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip to resist crying out.

"Please, don't interrupt. The adults are talking," Elsa chided mildly. "Well, I suppose that you're not really invested in the girl's life anyway."

Emilia just stared at Elsa. "I hate you, Elsa," Emilia whispered, her face smooth and impassive. "Do you have any idea what you've done to me?"

Elsa cocked her head. "Strange. To the best of my recollection, we've never met before."

Emilia made no sign that she had even heard Elsa. "You nearly killed my Subaru," She whispered. "You tried to take him from me before I even knew him. Before I ever imagined how different my life could be. I have had a hundred nightmares of his body bleeding on the floor and your face is in each and every one of them."

"Oh my. You *are* attached to that boy, aren't you? And you've been dreaming of me? It really makes me happy to know that I've touched your life in such a profound way," Elsa said without a shred of irony. "But since you brought it up,

what if I sliced *him* open?" Elsa brought her dagger closer to Subaru's prone body.

Emilia cocked her head. Her face was expressionless.

Elsa giggled. "Well, *that* made an impact! You see who has the upper hand now!"

"No," Emilia said in an emotionless voice. "Actually, I was just pondering the irony. You see, Elsa, I was debating with myself if the right thing to do would be to spare your life. I hate hurting people. Killing sickens me. Inflicting pain fills me with revulsion. Honestly, I was working very hard to try to convince myself that I didn't want to kill even *you* unless you really left me with no other choice. Thank you for making this decision so simple for me."

Elsa looked confused.

The she screamed.

Elsa convulsively dropped her dagger and Anri leaped to safety. Victoire grabbed her and wrapped her arms around her protectively.

Elsa was staring in horror at the skin on the back of her hand. It bulged grotesquely as if there was an inflating balloon under her skin. The dome expanded until it was nearly the size of a billiard ball. Her flesh struggled to contain it but a moment later, her skin reached its limit and tore wide open, revealing wet, red meat underneath. A thin shaft of ice emerged. It grew out of her hand, growing leaves, blossoming, and finally turning red.

A frost flower.

Elsa stared down at her hand in horror and then looked up at Emilia. She stared back, grim as death.

"Threatening my Subaru," Emilia said softly. "Was a very poor decision on your part."

Elsa bolted, racing past Emilia and out the bedroom door.

Emilia made no move to stop her.

Elsa stumbled out of the house and took off running.

"We can't let her get away!" Anri screamed.

Emilia nodded and then turned to follow Elsa, walking unhurriedly, one hand pressed firmly against her bleeding stomach.

Subaru found himself sitting in a chair in a huge, ornate bedroom with a large canopy bed. The chair was enormous compared to him, seemingly made for a giant.

OK, I have no clue where the hell I am but at least I have a body again. That's progress.

Subaru looked down and realized that he was wearing a dress.

Wait. What the fuck?

Subaru was wearing a white dress with blue flowers all over it. It was the kind of outfit that would be put on a little girl.

Subaru blinked and suddenly noticed his own hand. It was small, soft, and slightly chubby. It was a child's hand.

Holy shit. I am in the body of a little girl! This chair isn't made for giants, I'm just that small!

"Lady Typhon!" A voice called out.

Subaru's gaze swiveled to the speaker. The man who had just entered the room was dressed in a priestly white robe with a large white hood.

"We've found more sinners for your divine judgment!" He proclaimed.

"Yay!" Subaru exclaimed in a high voice, clapping his hands together.

What the hell is going on here? I feel like I'm a passenger in my own body. Actually, I guess I'm a passenger in someone else's body. What the fuck is this?

A several men, who were similarly dressed to the priest, dragged a pair of women inside the room. One of the women was dressed in a dirty, patchwork robe while the other wore a plain woolen dress.

"Kneel before the Maiden of Justice!" The priest ordered and the men forced the two women to their knees.

The poorly dressed woman stared at the child in sheer terror. "Are you really the Sin Archbishop of Pride?" She whispered.

"No!" Subaru said, folding his arms across his chest, his face twisting into a pout. "I am the Witch of Pride! Don't be rude! It's not nice to call people by the wrong titles. I want to be a Witch!"

Huh?!

The priest coughed, looking awkward. "Perhaps we should get on with the judgment, Lady Typhon," He suggested.

"What have they done?" Subaru asked curiously.

"The baker claims that her assistant has been stealing bread from her," The priest explained.

"It's not my fault!" The dirty woman complained. "I need to feed my family! I work fourteen hour days for her and she keeps docking my pay because she says that I'm not working hard enough."

"If you don't like it, go find yourself a better job!" The other snapped. "You stole from me! You just admitted it!"

"Hm," Subaru said in a cheerful voice. "Which of you is a bad person?"

Subaru calmly walked over to the women. The poor woman was clearly terrified and needed to be restrained by the priests. The baker was more composed but was becoming increasingly unsettled as Subaru approached her.

Subaru touched each of their hands.

The poor woman immediately crumbled to bits, her body falling apart with a splash of blood.

The baker shrank away as far as she could but this wasn't very far because she had several men restraining her.

Subaru looked down at the ruins of the woman's corpse. "You knew in your heart that what you were doing was wrong but you did it anyway. Sin demands a price from all of us," Subaru chastised with the calm certainty of a small child.

What the honest-to-god fuck?!

Wait. That was the same trick that I used on the slavers in my dream earlier. And Beatrice and I read a story once about a Witch who punished sinners by breaking their bodies apart with the touch of a hand. Is this some kind of vision? Could I be seeing the prior holder of the Authority of Pride?

Subaru turned his gaze to the panicking baker. "There was no guilt in your heart over your actions, so you must be a good person. You can go!" Subaru pronounced.

The priests immediately let the baker loose and the terrified woman fled.

"Lady Typhon," The head priest asked with a reverent bow, "Do you wish to judge more sinners now or would you prefer to do so after your afternoon nap?"

Subaru yawned. "I'm not sleepy yet," He protested.

"Of course not," The priest agreed, gently guiding her toward a large canopy bed nearby.

The world faded to black.

Elsa sprinted through the tiny village. Her body ached and throbbed from a dozen different places. The thin shafts of sprouting frost flowers had ripped through her skin and poked through her clothes in a dozen places, like bits of straw through a scarecrow.

Iruk was just outside of the forest's perpetual winter so the ground was soft and muddy but it was clear of snow. Villagers were peeking through windows or cracked doors in the early morning light, afraid to come outside.

It seems that I bit off a bit more than I can chew here, Elsa thought to herself calmly. *I wasn't expecting to encounter a literal Witch! I need to fall back. Mother Capella will forgive me for this failure when I tell her that I know where her most hated enemy is. I can certainly outrun that elf. Then I just need to find someone who can remove the curse she put on me-*

A deep throbbing pain located in Elsa's thigh suddenly flared up into white hot agony.

She physically *heard* her thigh bone crack and Elsa fell down on her face with a scream.

Elsa gasped in pain as she managed to roll onto her back. She bit her lip looking down at her thigh and the swelling boil that she could see inflating under her skin.

Then her skin split open and another frost flower forced it's way up out of her body. Her nylons proved no barrier to the flower at all.

It blossomed and turned red as the flower drank her blood.

Elsa bit her lip against the pain as she tried to fight her way back to her feet.

"You're not getting away, Elsa," A voice said quietly.

Elsa looked behind her and saw the elf approaching at a walk. Blood was still streaming from her stomach wound. "You will run *nowhere*, Elsa," The elf snapped, her face suddenly twisting in fury. "You will never threaten anyone in my family ever again!"

Elsa turned to run away but her attempt to stand on a broken leg failed and she collapsed back on the ground.

Elsa tried to say something to the elf but her throat bulged ominously. Elsa's normally calm face twisted in horror. A moment later, a frost flower burst out of her throat. The frozen shaft was not quite large enough to fill the hole it had erupted through. This left Elsa gasping and wheezing for breath through the hole in her neck.

Elsa tried again to speak but no air reached her lips. It all whistled out through the hole in her throat.

Emilia stared at Elsa expressionlessly. "I accidentally cast these flowers on a friend once. ...I even cast them on Subaru," The elf girl said in a flat voice, never breaking eye contact with Elsa. "It's one of the greatest regrets of my life. I always seem to hurt the people that I care about when I use my magic. But I think... I think that I can control the frost flowers now. I'm sure that I can lift the curse from you."

Elsa tried to plead but she had no breath. A new blossom burst from her knee with a crunching sound. The tiny plant cracked through her kneecap like a tree's roots would break apart stone. Her leg jerked spastically before coming to rest at an unnatural angle.

Elsa tried to scream in pain but it came out as just a breathy whisper.

The elf nodded. "I'm not like you, Elsa. I don't enjoy death and pain. It's abhorrent to me. I'm sure that if our roles were reversed you'd be delighted and fascinated by this display. Honestly? I find the sight of you suffering like this revolting. My instinct is to spare your life."

Elsa wheezed something, her lips desperately trying to form words.

The elf cocked her head. "You're saying that you've learned your lesson, I assume. That you don't want to die? That, if I let you go, you'll never trouble me again? We both know that you're lying, Elsa."

Elsa hacked, coughed and wheezed through the whole in her throat. Her right eye rippled like a pool of water into which a stone had been dropped. Elsa's face contorted in horror and her mouth moved in a soundless scream as a frost flower slowly pushed its way out of her eye socket. Her eyeball stretched like jelly, then popped and collapsed in on itself like a balloon with a pinhole leak. A frost flower emerged from the seeping red and black hole in Elsa's skull. It bloomed and turned red, covering part of Elsa's face with its petals.

"I have to kill you, Elsa," Emilia said with calm determination. "I *have* to. And even if I didn't have to, I'd still want to," She admitted. "I *hate* you, Elsa. You almost killed my Subaru. You almost took him from me before I ever had the chance to know him. Do you know how many nightmares I've had about that night in the loot house? How much guilt and self-loathing you gave me for how helpless I was when Subaru needed me most? Can you even imagine what my life would be like if he'd died that night?"

Elsa tried to say something but she aspirated on her own bloody spit and broke into a massive coughing fit.

The elf shook her head. "The truth is, I don't just want you to die, Elsa. I want you to suffer. I want you to experience a tiny fraction of the pain that I would have felt if you'd actually killed Subaru. I want to stand here and watch you cry and beg and break down in terror while I pray for peace to finally come to all of your victims whom you put through the same unimaginable fear and suffering."

Elsa whimpered piteously.

Emilia's face twisted in hatred. She raised hands that suddenly crackled with brilliant cobalt energy. With a deafening scream, she drove her fingers into Elsa's stomach, sending her magic pouring into Elsa's helpless body. "Die!"

Elsa's head snapped back, buffeted by the magic that ripped through her like electricity. Her teeth snapped violently together as every muscle in her body threatened to tear loose from her bones. Elsa felt her body swelling up like a balloon from all the power that Emilia was pouring into her. She felt like the only thing still holding her together was her skin. The stone walls of the surrounding houses were immediately coated with ice.

"Die, Elsa!" Emilia screamed. Huge stalagmites of ice grew like trees all over the village.

The blue light flared. Emilia and Elsa became too bright for any observers in the nearby houses to look at. The cold around them surged to unimaginable levels and all the houses in the village were covered in thick ice. Frost flowers bloomed all around Emilia.

"Just die! You will never hurt my Subaru ever again!" The elf shrieked.

Elsa was in more pain than she had ever imagined. Certainly more than she had ever contemplated in regards to herself. Her body inflated and bulged under the force of Emilia's magic. Her body fought to hold itself together.

Elsa thought that there was no way that her body could contain this kind of force.

There was a terrible ripping sound. Elsa's last conscious thought was that she appeared to be flying.

No. No, she was *falling*, she amended. But her consciousness fled before her severed head could strike the ground.

Emilia fell to her knees, her magic was well and truly drained. She knelt there, panting for breath and clutching the wound in her stomach that still throbbed and bled.

Emilia looked up. Elsa's body lay in pieces, scattered all around her. Each piece was captured in perfect relief in a block of solid ice and every body part was a seedbed of beautiful frost flowers. Elsa's severed head wore an expression of absolute shock. Her right eye was covered by a red frost flower blossom.

Emilia's face twisted in confusion as she looked at Elsa's dismembered corpse as if she had no idea how it had ever come to be there. She looked around and saw the villagers staring at Emilia through the windows. Their faces were contorted in terror.

Emilia stared at Elsa's severed head and she clapped a hand over her mouth as if to hold back a scream.

Emilia gasped for breath for a time. She looked down at Elsa's head in silence. Her breathing slowly steadied.

Then Emilia's hand fell away from her mouth and her scream went unvoiced. Her horror left her and she looked at the slain Bowel Hunter with nothing but weariness and disgust.

Emilia sighed. "It's just as Beatrice once told me," She said in utter exhaustion. "Anyone who hurts Subaru deserves to die." She shook her head. "Elsa, you deserved far worse than you received but the important thing is that you're dead. You'll never threaten my Subaru ever again."

In his dreams, Subaru was still a little girl. He was skipping and hopping over the cracks in the street of an enormous walled city.

Behind Subaru walked a huge procession of men and women in clerical robes, chanting and banging gongs.

Subaru's host felt delighted to be leading this parade but Subaru looked around with increasing unease.

Where are the people in this town? If they're hiding in their homes from Typhon's... cult-thing then why is there no smoke coming from any of the chimneys?

I guess maybe I learned a few lessons from my return to Arlem when Petelguese jumped me.

Typhon, my intuition tells me that you're about to learn a lesson too.

Subaru heard a rumbling sound in the distance.

He looked up and beheld an enormous wall of water at least forty feet high, rushing straight toward him. In the distance, Subaru saw that great gates in the city walls had been opened to let in the water.

"Yay! Now we can all go swimming!" Typhon cheered, clapping her hands.

The priests behind her ran away screaming.

Good luck, guys. You're not outrunning that wave.

Oh. And classy move by the way, leaving behind the 'blessed child' or whatever the hell you think that she is. Real bunch of believers, you are.

Typhon's face creased in confusion as she watched her congregation flee. The perplexed little girl turned to stare at the huge wall of water racing toward her.

Emilia looked around her as she stood back up. The villagers were peeking out of their frozen houses, staring at Emilia in raw terror.

Emilia was panting for breath as she struggled to apply pressure to her wound. She inspected it. It looked deep and it showed no sign of clotting.

"Emilia!" Anri said, rushing out of the house and over to her. "Are you alright?"

"I..." Emilia panted, fighting for breath.

Anri inspected the wound. "You need bandages. And an antidote. That woman puts poison on her blades."

"Are you all... alright?" Emilia gasped.

Anri nodded as she helped Emilia to her feet. "Yeah! Thanks to you, we're all fine. I... I don't even know how to thank you, Emilia!"

Emilia shook her head. "You don't need to. You saved Subaru's life. I can never repay you for that," She said in a slurred voice.

Emilia leaned heavily against Anri. Her legs were losing strength. She'd lost a lot of blood and the cut wasn't closing. "Emilia, we need to treat this wound right away!" Anri hissed as she worked to lead Emilia back to the church.

"Anri, could you... could you find me some paper?" Emilia gasped as they stepped back in the kitchen. Victoire lay unconscious against the wall, an empty bottle next to her. Her stomach had been crudely bandaged.

"Paper? What do you want paper for?" Anri said as she laid Emilia down on the kitchen table. Anri inspected the wound and quickly started to bandage it.

Anri looked over at Victoire and her eyes bulged out in horror. She desperately inspected the empty bottle but it was dry as a bone. "Oh, fuck... Victoire, you didn't..."

Anri bit her lip and thought hard for a moment. Then she started grabbing things off the shelves and throwing them into a pot. She was in such a hurry that sometimes she forgot to open the pouches full of herbs before she tossed them in.

"I want... to write a final letter... to Subaru. I need to tell him... how sorry I am," Emilia breathed.

"What?! Don't be ridiculous! You're going to be... fine!" Anri said struggling to sound confident. She pulled a bottle of green jelly off the shelf and dabbed it onto Emilia's bandages.

Emilia gave a weary chuckle. "Please, don't... treat me like a child, Anri. I know how potent the venom... on Elsa's weapons is. Nobody expected Subaru to live and he had four of the best healers in the kingdom trying to save him. Maybe... it's better this way. I can't hurt Subaru or hold him back anymore. I just... wish I could have told Subaru that I love him one more time," She murmured.

"Listen, Mili, you are going to be fine!" Anri snarled. "I am not going to lose you! And those healers lacked a key advantage that I possess," Anri said tightly, continuing to dab the ointment onto Emilia's wound.

"Oh? What's that?" Emilia murmured in an incurious tone.

Anri snorted. "I happen to know an effective antidote for Elsa's poison. The poison is made from a dangerous herb that only grows in the northern wastes," Anri shook her head. "Now I just need to make the antidote for you..."

Emilia started to ask a question but then her eyes rolled up in her head as she lost consciousness.

The dark abyss that Subaru found himself trapped in, blurred through a wide variety of flickering images. Subaru's restless spirit wandered through strange alien landscapes and beheld the lives of thousands of people. Most came and went too fast to even be appreciated, much less identified. Subaru sensed that he was briefly many different people, from all races and different walks of life. Some good, some evil, some both, some neither, but none that made any lasting impression on him.

Finally, Subaru felt the world take shape around him again.

Subaru found himself sitting in a huge tent that reminded him of Crusch's command tent. Several men stood around him dressed in what looked like Roman Centurion uniforms.

Subaru still wasn't in his own body, this body was taller and thinner. He wore a long purple cloak and a similar type of armor to the others although his was much more ornate. An jeweled diadem sat on his head.

"Imperator, the men are angry," One said in a worried tone. "They are poised to mutiny. They haven't been home in nearly two years and now that you've sent home the elderly and the cripples, the men are *all* demanding to go home."

Subaru shook his head angrily. "After all that we've been through together, to see it come to this..."

"Lord Helios, it might be wiser to withdraw for the moment until the men calm down," A gray haired veteran said.

Subaru gave the speaker a cold glare and the man bowed his head, blushing like a school boy that had been scolded.

"Is the platform built?" Subaru asked calmly.

"Yes, your majesty, but-" The first said.

"Then let us deal with this matter!" Subaru said decisively. He marched out of his tent with his officers hurriedly following after him.

Subaru marched through a huge camp reminiscent of Crusch's army but far bigger. It was a veritable city of huge, elaborate tents.

Subaru realized that any number of people were all watching him as he marched through the camp. The many looks cast his way ranged from adoring to hostile, hopeful to fearful, but Subaru paid none of them any mind. A cold determination gripped his heart and drove him forward.

Subaru marched onto a crudely constructed wooden stage in the middle of the camp. Standing just outside the army camp was a field of towering metal statues that stood at least fifteen feet tall. They were shaped like powerfully built men with sharp faces and metal beards. As Subaru climbed on top of the stage, he saw the statues turn their heads and look at him with glowing cobalt eyes.

Those aren't statues! Those are robots! Or... at least something similar. They probably work off magic rather than machinery but the idea is the same. Golems?

That is fucking amazing! What I wouldn't give to take one of those apart and see what's inside! What kind of machinery makes it run? How does the magic integrate with the machinery?

"Fall in!" Subaru roared.

The Roman-looking soldiers standing in the surrounding field began to approach. Some grumbled a bit but they obeyed. They all approached the platform. Some stood at attention and some turned their faces away. Many of the soldiers at attention were discretely watching their sullen comrades with concern. The reticent soldiers stood there with arms folded, looking up darkly at Subaru.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I want to begin by saying that my words are not intended to prevent *any* of you from returning home."

The rebellious soldiers looked surprised.

"As far as I care," Subaru continued, "You can go wherever you wish!"

The dark looks returned.

A lot of these men look ready to start trouble but my host is either unaware of it or he doesn't care.

"But before you leave, I want you to know how I have treated each of you. And how you have all behaved towards me," Subaru proclaimed. "When I found you, you were farmers and herdsman, struggling to make your livelihood on the slopes of the mountains. Growing crops and raising animals that you could not protect. The barbarians came every year and it was always your homes that they burned, your food that they stole, your women they raped. Under my leadership, you have all gone from being slaves and chattel to becoming rulers over those very barbarians who once plundered your lands! Look at you now! Instead of herdsman and farmers, you have begun living in cities! With good laws and good customs to govern you!"

Subaru scowled down at the soldiers who had now given him their undivided attention. Even the formerly rebellious men were rapt. "The Easternlings! They used to *terrify* you! Well, we rule them now. The Southern Hordes, who were always looking for any excuse to come to your lands and loot and plunder? Today, they no longer demand tribute from you but depend upon us for their protection!"

Subaru shook his head, his expression twisted with disapproval and disgust. "All of this was great enough on its own, but small compared to what you have gained from me during *this* campaign!"

The soldiers began to look at one another uncertainly.

"We took Ionia and Miletus by siege! We defeated the great satraps of the Aegeus. The rest of the lands surrendered willingly and all of their wealth became yours! At your feet have been laid the gold of Tyrei and the jewels of Taocs. And yet *some* of you accuse me of hoarding the riches that should rightly be yours."

Subaru paused and glowered down at the the soldiers.

Subaru spread his arms wide. "Where are these riches, then?! What do you accuse me of withholding from you? What have I held back for myself aside from this purple cloak and crown? Nothing!" Subaru roared.

The soldiers were silent, looking up at Subaru in awe.

"Nothing!" Subaru repeated with contempt. "No man can point to *my* riches, only to the things that I hold in trust for each of you!" Subaru pointed accusingly at the soldiers.

The soldiers bit their lips and started to fidget like school boys being scolded.

Subaru leaped down from the stage, walking heedlessly among the army of heavily armed men. "And what would I *do* with wealth, anyway?!" Subaru demanded. "I eat what you eat!" He snapped in a soldier's face. The soldier flinched back. "I get no more rest than you!" Subaru snarled to another soldier who looked terrified. "Many are the nights that I have stood the watch, so that each of you could sleep soundly!" Subaru whirled around to face the soldiers, his face livid.

Several soldiers visibly flinched back.

Subaru raised his chin imperiously. "Who among you thinks that he's worked harder for *me* than I have for *him*?" Subaru demanded, looking all the soldiers in the eye.

The men looked at one another guiltily.

"If you have scars, strip and show them to me! I'll show you mine!" Subaru said defiantly. "There isn't one part of my body that doesn't bear a wound. And yet here I am, still leading you as conqueror of land and sea. As the Emperor that foreign potentates have openly begged to come and promise them protection against their terrible foes! When I found you, you were not knights or soldiers but herdsman and farmers! I trained you to be warriors and heroes of the land. When men questioned if peasants could endure the rage of war, I defended you! I told them that these men will endure any hardship and face any foe to ensure the safety of their homes and families!"

The soldiers trembled.

Subaru shook his head in disgust. "I have cared for you as though you were my own sons! I've paid off your debts, without asking you how you got them, although you're all paid well enough and you pillage every town that we take! Many of you wear golden laurels, badges of courage and valor gifted to you by me! Any one of us who died in battle, we buried with full honors! Many of them now stand immortalized in our country by bronze statutes. Their families are honored and pay no taxes in tribute of their sacrifice. Under my command, not *one* man has been killed for fleeing the enemy or for cowardice in battle! And now, I want to send some of you back, who have become crippled or grown old in my service, to be welcomed home as heroes. But since you *all* wish to go, then I say to all of you: Go!" Subaru pointed imperiously into the distance.

The very air in front of them ripped wide open and a hole appeared in thin air that led to another place. Through the portal, Subaru beheld the distant vision of a wondrous city of polished stone and metal.

"Go back and tell the people that your Emperor, conqueror of the barbarian tribes, who marched over the Inari Kush and the kingdom of Mercia, who crossed into the desert of Valeria where no man had ever led an army, I'd have crossed the Stygian River as well if you hadn't all cowered in fear at the sight of a few savages! When you get home, tell them that you abandoned your Emperor and left him under the protection of the very foreigners that you conquered! That you left him alone with only the IronBorn giants that I crafted for *your* protection! Perhaps this report of yours will seem glorious in the eyes of men and worthy in the eyes of the Gods!"

Subaru glowered at his men for a moment. Their fury had been quenched and these mighty veterans trembled like children, filled with shame and guilt.

"Be gone!" Subaru proclaimed, leaving his stage and marching back to his tent as the men murmured guiltily behind him.

Subaru was followed by his officers who were also murmuring.

God! That was an amazing speech! Hell, if he pointed at me right now, I'd be ready to pick up a sword and start marching. This guy turned a group of mutinous soldiers into cowering little boys. They all seem ready to beg for his forgiveness. This guy is unbelievable! Who is he?!

I've never heard of any of the places he mentioned. Is this the old world? The ancient world that existed before the Witch of Envy destroyed most of it? How far back am I? Is this man also the wielder of the Authority of Pride? He seems to have the power to create portals with a gesture. That is freaking amazing!

And he claims that he built those Golems? God, I wish I could sit down and talk with this guy for a few hours!

The whole world broke apart under his feet and Subaru fell screaming into the black void once again.

Subaru opened his eyes and realized that he was throwing up.

He bolted upright in bed, desperately looking for something to vomit into. Luckily, Anri was standing ready with a bucket in her arms.

Subaru bent double as he spewed into the bucket, not food but a thick, black sludge. His stomach cramped horribly as it tried to force the nauseating substance out of his body.

The sludge was thick as bread dough and Subaru's muscles ached as they slowly squeezed it out of his body.

Finally, Subaru was done and he fell back on the bed, gasping for breath.

Wow. Now I know how a tube of toothpaste feels...

Anri held a bucket full of rancid smelling black sludge that was streaked with red. She looked both impressed and disgusted by the quantity that Subaru had regurgitated.

Anri gingerly carried the bucket away, trying not to spill a drop of the foul substance. Subaru noticed uncomfortably that whatever he'd thrown up appeared to be congealing like wet cement.

"Where am I?" He asked weakly as Anri walked to a nearby window and simply dumped the disgusting mess into the bushes. It made a heavy thud when it hit the ground.

"You're in Iruk," A beautiful woman said, looking down at Subaru with disdain.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Victoire," She said shortly. "I'm the most amazing woman in Gusteko if not the entire world."

Subaru squinted at her. "Are you kidding me with that?" He asked incredulously.

Victoire scowled at him and left the room without a word.

Anri sighed. "You're not at your brightest, first thing in the morning, are you?" Anri said, matter-of-fact.

Subaru coughed. "Sorry, it's been a long couple of days," He sighed, trying to sit up.

"Are you feeling any better?" She asked, sitting down on the bed beside him.

Subaru slowly caught his breath. "I... don't know," He said honestly.

Anri shook her head. "I've never seen a person so contaminated by witchcraft, much less one who lived. The Black Water got you bad, Subaru."

Yeah. It was all the Black Water that contaminated me... There was no other witchcraft in me whatsoever.

Subaru frowned for a moment and triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Anri froze in place.

Hm. Interesting. Whatever was wrong with your ability seems to have addressed itself. Your power is restored. That's

one fewer problem to worry about.

A worried voice whispered from the depths of Subaru's mind. *Wait. What if the Authority really is damaging me like Mili said? What if my body was just too fragile to use it anymore and Reason and Judgment being disabled was my own body trying somehow to protect me?*

There is absolutely no evidence of any of that, The other voice immediately dismissed. *This is your power. The Authority submitted itself to you. There is no reason whatsoever to conclude that it's inherently toxic. Remember, even something like working out will increase the toxic byproducts in your muscles. This is a simple function of getting stronger. You overused the Authority at the slaver's camp and battling the Black Water so you required medical attention due to that overuse. What dedicated athlete has not similarly over-trained at one point or another? Your body has recovered and is doubtlessly now stronger than ever. There's no cause to worry about this any further.*

Over time, you and the Authority shall become increasingly well-suited to one another. After all, what well-tailored raiment need not be fitted to he who wears it?

Subaru exited *Reason and Judgment* feeling reassured but a thin seed of doubt lay in his mind.

Fitted to the wearer? Maybe... but who's wearing who?

Anri continued to speak, unable to notice the pause. "You came within inches of dying."

Subaru sighed as he finally pulled himself upright on the bed. "I seem to be doing that a lot," Subaru admitted.

Subaru glanced at his left side and gasped. His left arm was shriveled and stunted, the skin a burnt orange. Subaru had never been muscular but now his left arm was nothing but skin and bones. It almost looked like the arm of a twelve year old boy.

Subaru tried to move it and discovered that while he could still move the arm, it seemed to have barely any strength.

Anri winced. "It's really not as bad as it looks," Anri said soothingly.

Subaru looked at her in shock. "It almost *couldn't* be, could it?!" He asked incredulously.

Anri sighed. "A lot of your muscle tissue was destroyed but the basic muscle fibers are still sound. Your arm should recover its strength pretty quickly. Just keep exercising it, eat plenty of meat, and don't put it under too much strain. I gave it some healing magic and I'll give you more tonight. You should be back to normal in a day or two."

Subaru stared at his arm and just shook his head in disbelief.

Anri held out a bundle to him. "Your clothes," She prompted.

Subaru suddenly realized that he was sitting naked in front of Anri and turned bright red.

He grabbed his robe and quickly pulled it over him, giving himself some privacy. Then he started to pull on his pants and shirt under it.

"Where's Emilia?" He asked.

Anri glanced away and looked uncomfortable.

Subaru swallowed hard.

"Hey," She said slowly. "Come with me."

Subaru followed Anri down the hall and into another bedroom. And in the bed...

"Emilia!" Subaru shouted, springing to her bedside.

Emilia was unconscious. Her face was deathly pale and her stomach had been tightly bandaged. Subaru might have thought that she was dead except for the shallow movement of her chest.

Subaru knelt beside her and desperately grabbed her hand. It was ice cold.

Subaru squeezed his eyes tightly shut. He took a deep breath. "What happened here?" He growled.

Anri gave Subaru a pained look. "Alright. So my real name is Princess Kai-"

"I don't fucking care!" Subaru said flatly. "What happened to Emilia?"

Anri looked momentarily shocked at being spoken to this way but she simply bowed her head. Anri looked helpless and ashamed. "Emilia... was wounded in battle. She fell protecting all of us from a terrible foe."

"Who?!" Subaru demanded.

Anri sighed. "Elsa Granhiert. The Bowel Hunter."

"Elsa?!" Subaru gasped in horror. "Then this wound-"

"Is poisoned," Anri interrupted, her voice careworn. "Left untreated, it will not heal."

Subaru clapped a hand over his mouth.

Oh my God. How did I let this happen?! I was sleeping like a baby while Emilia was attacked!

Subaru took a slow ragged breath. "Where did she go?" He hissed.

Anri blinked. "Huh? Where did who go?" Anri asked in confusion.

"Elsa. I'm going to run her down and I will *make* her talk," Subaru grated. "If there's an antidote for her poisons, she must know what it is."

"Subaru," Anri said. "Elsa Granhiert is dead. Emilia won the fight and she killed the Bowel Hunter."

Subaru stared at Anri in shock.

"Mili fought to protect all of us!" Anri assured him. "She won a battle against a villain that has murdered hundreds! Emilia is a hero, Subaru!"

Do you really think that's what I want to hear right now, you little idiot?!

Oh my God. What if Emilia actually...

"If Elsa is dead..." Subaru whispered. "Then that means that there's no one who can tell us what the antidote is..."

No. I can't think like that.

I can do this. I can do this.

Think. Those healers in the capitol saved me and my cut was a lot bigger than Emilia's is.

I just need to find those healers and learn what they did.

Shit! I don't know who any of them were! I never asked Reinhard and he certainly won't be willing to tell me now!

"We actually do know an antidote," Anri said, cutting off Subaru's panicking thoughts.

"You do?!" Subaru asked, grabbing her shoulders and staring her in the face.

Anri nodded awkwardly, looking uncomfortable with Subaru's nearness. "We do but... we're having trouble finding the ingredients."

"What ingredients?" Subaru demanded.

Anri sighed. "We have everything that we need except for wyvern oil."

"Wyvern oil?" Subaru repeated. "We need to get that to heal Emilia?! Where are we going to find a wyvern?! Does anyone sell the oil?"

Anri had a helpless expression on her face. "I don't know! The type of poison that Elsa uses is mostly only used by mercenaries so civilian pharmacies never see the need to carry the antidote or its ingredients."

"Alright, what about military supplies?" Subaru demanded.

Anri nodded. "Yeah, they'd have it. I could requisition some from Siros but I've got no way to get back there! Siros is under attack right now and I'm deep in enemy territory."

Subaru shook his head. "Fine! What territory are we in right now?"

"Sanshi. I know that the local Sanshi garrison would have the oil-"

"Perfect. I'm going to go and borrow some oil from them!" Subaru asserted, walking out of the room. "Keep Emilia safe until I get back."

Anri gaped at Subaru and then hurried after him. "Subaru, you can't be serious!"

Subaru turned to glare at her. "Do I *look* like I'm serious?" He said in a deathly quiet voice.

Anri shook her head in disbelief. "Subaru, they will *never* give you the oil just because you ask! And I can't order them to cooperate with you because they're my enemies!"

Subaru bared his teeth. "Then it's your lucky day, Anri, because I may need to convince your enemies of the *urgency* of my quest!" Subaru snapped.

Anri stared at Subaru incredulously.

"Anri, where can I find an army camp?" He asked, opening doors in the hallway and looking for the exit.

Anri bit her lip. "You can just follow the river north. It will lead you to an army camp," Anri said uncertainly. "Patrasche

is tied up right outside the church."

"Great!" Subaru said through clenched teeth.

Subaru and Anri entered the kitchen where Victoire sat at the table. Victoire glowered at Subaru.

Anri hesitated. Then she sighed. "Subaru, I'm going to go with you."

"*What?!* No fucking way!" Victoire shouted.

"Yes, I am!" Anri yelled back. "Emilia has saved my life *twice* now, once at significant risk to her own! I *am* going to heal her!"

"Princess," Victoire said, clearly fighting for patience. "The elf-witch-"

"Call her that again, Victoire," Subaru whispered in a deadly tone.

Victoire glowered at him, showing no fear at all, then turned back toward Anri. "-Fought to save *this* jackass! She wasn't trying to protect you! You don't owe her a fucking thing!"

"My heart says otherwise," Anri said firmly. "Stay here, Victoire. Keep dosing Emilia with that blood replenishing draught. That will buy us a little time while we locate the oil. You ready, Subaru?"

Subaru glared at Victoire and strongly considered hurting her. Then he dismissed it as a waste of time. "Anri, why don't you stay here. You can take better care of Em-"

"I'm going with you, Subaru," Anri said firmly, picking her rapier off the kitchen counter and buckling it around her waist.

Subaru sighed. "Fine. Do you actually know how to use that sword?" He asked as they left the church and walked out into the early afternoon air.

"Yeah. I'm actually pretty good with it. Not that it matters much right now. I have a broken arm, remember?"

"Great. I'm taking a cripple into a potential fight," Subaru muttered as they approached Patrasche.

"Yeah, well your arm looks to be no great shakes at the moment either, you know," Anri muttered.

Subaru glared at her. Anri folded her 'arm' across her chest and looked back defiantly.

Subaru sighed and keep walking.

The dragon was tied up to the fence outside the church. As soon as Patrasche saw Subaru she perked up and started clucking with great excitement. She pulled as close to Subaru as her reins allowed. The moment that Subaru got in range she began to nuzzle him.

"Yeah, it's good to see you too, girl," Subaru muttered in a tired voice. "I'm glad that you're alright. Have you been fed today?"

"Yeah, I took care of that," Anri answered.

"Great," Subaru said, untying Patrasche.

Subaru tried to pick up her saddle but immediately dropped it. His left arm just wouldn't cooperate.

With one arm, Subaru struggled to pick up the saddle and place it onto Patrasche. He reached down to clinch it but without his hand on it, the saddle started to slide of.

Subaru made a desperate grab for it and caught the saddle but he knew that if he let go it would slide off again.

He stood there wondering what to do.

Anri sighed. "You hold, I'll tighten," She muttered, kneeling down.

Subaru nodded with a long sigh. "This mission is off to a great start. We only have two good arms between us!"

"Yeah," Anri replied. "If we have time on this trip, maybe we can go out and buy a pair of gloves."

Subaru shook his head and almost chuckled as Anri tied the saddle.

"Alright," Anri said, straightening up. "That ought to do it."

Subaru struggled with only one arm but he managed to pull himself up into the saddle.

Subaru looked down at Anri and bit his lip. "Maybe you should come over to this side," He gestured toward his good arm. "That way I can help pull you up."

Anri rolled her eyes. "I'm fine!" She muttered. She set her foot in the stirrup and quickly climbed up.

"Ow!" Subaru shouted. "You crushed my toes!"

"Come on! Don't be such a baby!" Anri snapped back, settling behind Subaru on the dragon.

Subaru growled at her and shook his head. He nudged Patrasche forward. "Alright, where are we going-" Subaru actually looked at the village for the first time and his eyes widened.

Every house in the village was covered in a sheet of ice a foot thick. It was clear that great effort can gone into knocking holes around the doors and windows. Gigantic icicles like tree trunks jutted from the ground pointing up at the sky. The center of town was covered in a field of delicate, beautiful frost flowers.

A few of the locals were gathered outside and they pointed fearfully at Subaru and Anri.

"What the fuck *happened* here?!" Subaru demanded.

"Emilia happened," Anri said shortly.

Subaru scowled. "Oh, this is just great! Word is going to get around about this *real* fucking fast!"

"Oh, you think?" Anri asked mockingly. "That's why we should hurry up and find the antidote for your lover so that we can all get the hell out of here," Anri added meaningfully.

Subaru sighed. "I don't think that we have that kind of time," Subaru muttered. "Can Emilia be moved safely?"

Anri thought for a moment. "Yeah. I mean, within reason. We can't bump her around in a dragon saddle. The few wounds that she's managed to mend will reopen."

"So we need to use a wagon," Subaru replied.

"I don't have-"

"I'll go shopping. Someone in the village must have one," Subaru replied.

Anri nodded slowly. "Alright, I'll start packing everything up then. Since an assassin showed up here, I'm guessing that House Griest knows all about this place. That means that we probably can't ever come back here anyway. We should grab anything useful that we can carry. We have enough Blood Replenishing potion to last us several days if I bottle it. I'll pack whatever medicinal herbs I can too."

"Sounds good," Subaru replied. "I'll find us a wagon and see if I can buy some food."

"Subaru, are you planning to take her back to... there?" Anri asked meaningfully.

Subaru shrugged. "It's the only safe place that I can think of right now."

Anri nodded. "OK," She walked back into the church.

Subaru found the town's only store without much effort. It was really just a large house with lots of produce set out on the spacious front porch.

The house was covered in a coat of ice. Subaru got the impression that the food had only been set out this morning out of a desperate need for normalcy at any cost. The unnatural weather that had struck the village was staggering and people were clamoring for anything that reminded them of more peaceful times.

The area in front of the store was crowded with people who were all talking nervously. As Subaru approached, they all dispersed, pulling away from him.

This is weird. I wonder what tipped them off that I'm with Emilia. Maybe they saw me exit the church with Anri?

The only one left on the porch was a trembling old woman in a shopkeeper's apron.

"Do you belong to that witch?!" She squeaked.

Subaru glowered at her. "I just want to buy some food," He said, ignoring her question.

"Take whatever you want but please don't hurt us!" She replied, shrinking back.

Subaru had to restrain himself from slapping the old woman as he gathered three small bags of food that lay on the ground in front of the porch. It was a large handful to carry, especially with only one arm, and Subaru struggled to juggle it all as he reached into his money pouch and pulled out three golden coins.

This has got to be at least ten times the price of these food bags but I don't have any smaller coins. Besides, we did kind of... mess up their village.

Subaru extended his hand to the woman with the gold coins in it, careful not to approach any closer.

The old woman stared at him and shook her head. "Please just leave. We have nothing you or the witch could want. Please just go away," She whimpered.

Subaru's face twisted in contempt and he let the gold coins fall into the mud at his feet.

Then he turned on his heel and stalked away.

An older man spat on the ground. "That witch wrecked our village. She broke our houses and froze our homes! Are we really going to let her and her cultists get away with this?"

"Do *you* want to be the one to try and stop them?" Another villager grumbled.

The old man looked awkward. "The soldiers are already on their way. All we need to do is stall them for a bit and then the soldiers can take care of them."

The old woman looked down at the three gold coins that lay in soft mud in front of her. This was nearly the equivalent of a full month's sales. She hesitantly reached out for the coins.

A tall man quickly grabbed her wrist. "Martha! Are you crazy? The witch will have put a curse on those coins! They'll make your whole body putrefy or turn you into a box elder, like as not."

Martha sighed. "True," She said reluctantly.

Martha quietly pushed the three coins deep into the soft, muddy earth and then covered them up with dirt.

As he walked back toward the church, Subaru found an old man wearing a straw hat and chewing on a piece of grass, sitting in a rickety old wagon.

"Hey, how much for your wagon?" Subaru asked.

"It's not for sale, 'specially not to the likes of *you*. I'll have no truck with Witch Cultists."

Subaru drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I need a wagon. Five gold coins for it."

The old man looked at him thoughtfully as he chewed the grass. "Ten," He said flatly.

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Done," He growled, holding out the coins.

The man took the coins. "Pleasure doing business with ya!" The old man said sarcastically. He spat on the ground as he walked away.

I feel a strong urge to smash this old man against the wall and break him open like a rotten fruit...

Subaru took a moment to master his temper. Then he whistled for Patrasche.

The black dragon came racing up to Subaru quickly. However, when she saw the wagon, she recoiled.

She gave Subaru a look of such incredulous betrayal that he almost laughed.

"I'm sorry, girl," Subaru said, rubbing her face. "It's an emergency."

The dragon sighed, not looking especially mollified but she tolerated Subaru harnessing her to the wagon.

Subaru drove the wagon back to the church and climbed out.

He went to enter the church when Patrasche interrupted him with an anxious cluck.

Subaru smiled and patted her head. "Sorry girl, can't unharness you yet. We've got a ways to go."

The dragon sighed. Subaru stood for a moment, stroking the aggrieved dragon. He found that he could hear raised voices inside the Church.

Subaru entered the church. He walked into the kitchen and straight into an argument.

"Abso-fucking-lutely not, Princess! No way in hell! You can't just go and attack a Sanshi-

"And perhaps I wouldn't have had to if you hadn't done *that*!" Anri said in a clipped tone.

"Oh, fuck me, Princess!" Victoire protested. "What was I supposed to do?! Die for a witch?!"

"She is *not* a witch. Moreover there is almost no chance that you would have died from your wound," Anri said coldly. "But that's neither here nor there. Now we need to go find more medicine."

"Let *him* do it, Princess! Being around him just puts you in more danger! Let the little cocksucker go off with his elf and find the cure! We need to get out of here! You associating with those two is not doing you any good!"

"I'm not so certain. Ignoring my debt to them, I actually think that we might get a lot out of it. Beyond that, we *will* be leaving immediately," Anri replied. "But we are going to the army camp for medicine. *You* are going to go to the dropbox and deliver the missives-

"Oh fuck, no!" Victoire protested immediately. "I'm your last remaining bodyguard! You're not going without me-"

"You *have* to go, Victoire!" Anri said forcefully. "When he finds out what you did, he will *kill* you!"

Victoire snorted. "Believe me, Princess, I can handle that prick. I may very well be the most amazing person that you'll

ever meet!"

Anri rolled her eyes. "Under any other circumstances, your ego would make me laugh but not right now."

"Princess, I can *not* fucking let you to do this! You've already been through at least three assassination attempts on this trip! Now you want to just go off and wander the country side unescorted?!"

"*Let?*" Anri repeated in a dangerous tone. "Victoire, you are one of my family's Shadows. That mean that you are under my authority. You *will* follow my instructions."

"Princess, I know for a motherfucking *fact* that your uncle and grandpa would be shitting bricks if they knew that you were doing this!" Victoire said firmly.

Anri glared at her coldly. "My grandfather is the Patriarch," Anri said very formally. "He reigns over the Church, not over me. My uncle is Regent. He does not wear the crown. *I* do! I intend to repay my debt to Lady Emilia by curing her of this poisoning. I will depart with Subaru. *You* will deliver the missives I wrote to the Shadow network as I have instructed. Our safe-house here is no longer secure and all the Shadows must be made aware of this. My uncle and grandfather must also be appraised of our status. You will attend to these matters and I will meet you at the safe-house near Stoneybrooke in a few days."

Victoire looked aghast. "Come on, Princess, at the very least, let me fucking come with you! You can't just waltz off into danger all alone!"

"I won't be alone," Anri replied. "I'll have Subaru and Emilia with me."

Victoire slapped her forehead. "So you're going off into danger with a mother-fucking elf in a comma and a skinny, pasty, little runt, who looks like he'd need to get naked just to count to twenty one! You think *that's* going to make me feel better?!" Victoire sounded like the mere thought disgusted her.

Subaru clenched his fists.

"Enough," Anri said formally. "Your feelings are *not* my primary concern as long as a friend of mine is currently in critical condition. I do not care to discuss this matter further. You have been given your instructions. Carry them out."

Victoire stood there for a moment looking livid then she turned and walked out of the church with a set of letters folded under her arm.

She looked murderously at Subaru as she passed by him. Subaru returned the glare.

Victoire closed the door on her way out.

Anri sank into a chair, looking exhausted.

"Trouble with the household staff?" Subaru asked, struggling to sound flippant and not succeeding.

Anri sighed. "The Shadows are completely loyal to House Ithil but they don't take orders very well. They're expected to have a large degree of independence and act on their own initiative so it's sometimes hard to rein them in," She said, dropping her formal tone.

"You want me to slap her around a little?" Subaru offered, only half kidding.

Anri shook her head. "No. She'll do what she was told now. I'll meet her in Stoneybrooke once Emilia is better. Besides, I know how sensitive you and Emilia are about people knowing that you're staying in that village so I couldn't let her come with us anyway."

Subaru raised an eyebrow. "Well, thanks."

"Did you find a wagon?"

"Yeah. And some food."

"Perfect. I've packed all the medicine and anything else I could find."

"Great. I'll help you carry all the stuff into the wagon. We'll move Emilia last."

Despite working with only two arms between them, Anri and Subaru packed the wagon quickly.

Finally, Subaru and Anri worked together to carry Emilia out of bed and into the wagon. They laid her down carefully in the wagon, swaddled in blankets and cushions.

Subaru gently stroked her hair but she didn't respond.

"Alright," Subaru sighed. "Let's get out of here."

"You're not going anywhere," A tall man with a long face called.

Subaru looked up and realized that the cart was being surrounded by villagers with bared teeth. The villagers were carrying pitchforks, shovels, pickaxes and any other weapons that they could find.

Anri drew herself up as straight as she could. "Please listen to me. We have no quarrel with you," She said in a loud clear voice. "We were just leaving anyway. Simply let us depart in peace and you will never see us again."

"And what? All's forgiven, just like that?" The man demanded. "What about the damage to our homes?"

The crowd shouted angrily in agreement.

Subaru thought about it. *They do have a point, I guess...* "I could offer you gold in compensation," He suggested.

The man didn't even seem to hear him. "What about the crops that failed last year?"

Subaru blinked. "What the hell does that have to do with us?"

"Did your witch put a curse on our crops?! What about Meg's baby that died of the pox last season? Did the witch steal her life?"

Subaru scowled. "Now you're just being ridiculous," Subaru said coldly.

"You two aren't going anywhere!" The man shouted. "The authorities are on their way and they'll deal with you witches and cultists good and proper."

The crowd growled their agreement.

Subaru closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

More than anything, he wanted to just unload all of his rage and frustration on these villagers. But he knew in his heart that, despite their ignorant attitudes, these peasants were innocent of what had happened to Emilia.

But he still wanted to smash them into pieces. He held back by sheer willpower.

"I'd like to raise a small question if you don't mind," He said in a barely controlled voice. "What exactly makes you think that threatening a witch and her cultists is the *smart* thing to do?"

The crowd was dead silent.

The tall man seemed momentarily nonplussed. Then he said, "We ain't afraid of you!"

"Really? Because you don't sound very convincing," Subaru said, his voice like ice.

The man bit his lip. "Your witch is out cold!"

The crowd rumbled in agreement, their voices threatening.

Subaru's eyes narrowed dangerously. He reached over to Anri and deftly drew the startled girl's rapier.

The crowd muttered in fear and drew back.

Subaru swung the rapier through the air where it made a chill whistle. "Listen to me very carefully," Subaru said in a deathly whisper. All eyes focused on him. "This woman is the only thing that I have left in this entire world. She is *everything* to me. If you want to try and take her away from me, you're going to have to do it the hard way."

Subaru walked slowly toward the crowd and they started to stumble backwards, tripping over each other as they hurried to get out of his way. "Is there anyone here foolish enough to try their strength against mine?" Subaru whispered. "Honestly, after the week from hell that I've had, dealing with you wretches would be fucking therapeutic. Would anyone like to challenge me? Anyone at *all*?"

The crowd shrank back from Subaru, trembling.

He stared them down with an icy expression for a long moment.

None of the villagers seemed willing to make the first move.

Subaru shook her head. "Wise choice," He murmured, climbing onto the wagon where he was quickly joined by Anri.

Subaru snapped the reins and Patrasche started pulling the wagon out of the village.

Anri surreptitiously looked behind them. "They're not following us."

"Good," Subaru grumbled. His rage, having been awoken by the villagers was slow to go back to sleep. He handed Anri her rapier. "Although, honestly, I do wish that I'd been able to knock at least a few of them around. At the moment, I have a fuck-ton of pent up rage and there's nothing I can do with it..."

Anri gave him a sympathetic look.

Subaru sighed. "Alright, so I don't know the way back to the village from here. I'm guessing that you don't either so we'll have to take the long way around and go back through Rixum. I know the way to the village from there."

Anri's expression was pained. "Subaru, I've been thinking. That's not going to work," Anri said reluctantly.

Subaru waved her objection aside. "Look, we won't go *through* Rixum. We'll just go near it and pick up the forest trail

there. I don't want to get jumped by the locals again any more than you do."

"No! What I mean is, we need to find the antidote for Emilia."

"I *know* that," Subaru said, trying not to growl and mostly failing. "We'll leave Emilia in the village where she'll be safe and then go search for the cure."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you! That won't work!" Anri snapped. "Emilia is stable but she's not out of danger. We can leave her alone for an hour or two while we go to try to find the antidote but we can't leave her alone for a whole day! We'll have to take her with us while we go to find the antidote."

"What?!" Subaru demanded.

Anri shrugged. "That's just the way it is. Don't kill the messenger."

Subaru let out a long hiss. "Fine. Which way are we going to find that army camp?" He grumbled.

"You want to head northwest from here. Follow the river," Anri answered.

Subaru pulled the reins and Patrasche did as instructed.

"Alright," Subaru grumbled. "Catch me up to speed. What did I miss while I was asleep?"

Anri shrugged. "Honestly, I think you already know most of the details," Anri answered. "You were poisoned by the Black Water and we needed to go somewhere that I could make the antidote. Iruk was the closest place that my family had a safe-house so we went there."

"Your family?" Subaru grumbled.

Anri sighed. "My real name is Kairei vas Sirose an Ithil."

Subaru waited but Anri didn't continue. "Cool. That's a real nice name, Anri, or Kairei, or whoever the hell you are, but it doesn't mean a whole lot to me."

Anri grumbled something under her breath. "Call me 'Anri!' And the point is that I'm the Princess of Siros."

"Neat," Subaru said shortly.

Anri glowered at him. "Subaru. Are you *trying* to be difficult?"

"No, I'm just not impressed!" Subaru shot back. "I've spent the past two months with nobility of all kinds. I even had a title myself for a bit. That means I know exactly how meaningless titles really are!"

Anri fumed. "Believe me, I completely agree with you about that but do you want to know what happened to Emilia or would you rather keep taking cheap shots at me?"

Subaru didn't answer right away. Finally, he let out a sigh that sounded more like a growl. "Alright, talk! I'll listen. Why do you have a safe-house in Iruk?"

Anri sighed. "OK, so my family has an organization called the Shadows. They guard the Grand Archives and they work as spies and infiltrators and occasionally assassins. Because of this intelligence network, my family has safe-houses all over Gusteko and even some in the southern kingdoms. They're used by operatives to meet up, resupply, and hide out. Grandfather taught me where most of the safe-houses were, in case I ever needed to use one."

"And you needed one on this trip?" Subaru asked.

Anri rolled her eyes. "Did I ever! House Griest is trying to kill me to improve their chances of taking the Holy Throne. Not to mention ending my line and claiming our lands. My party and I were ambushed on our way back from a conference in Pardochel. Beyond that, House Griest has laid siege to my lands. I was trying to get to Iruk to sync up with whatever Shadows had escaped the massacre and then try to get home. Unfortunately, it looks like Victoire was the only survivor..."

Anri looked off into the distance sadly for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and shook her head. "Anyway, I knew that we had medicine here so when you were poisoned, Emilia and I brought you here to nurse you back to health. It was going well until Elsa showed up..."

Subaru trembled violently and then started biting off sulfurous curses under his breath.

Anri stared at him in concern. "Subaru, what are you doing?"

"Nothing!" He snapped. "What happened then?"

Anri frowned. "Victoire was injured in the fight but Emilia fought off Elsa," Anri said slowly. "She managed to kill the Bowel Hunter but she took a bad wound in return."

"Wait, Victoire was injured? Why isn't she bleeding out then?"

Anri didn't respond.

"Anri," Subaru growled.

She sighed. "We only had a single dose of the antidote. I was going to gamble that half a dose each would save their lives. But by the time I got back to the church with Emilia... Victoire had drunk the entire dose..."

Subaru trembled like a restless volcano. "Brilliant! Really fucking spectacular! I knew I should have ripped that sanctimonious bitch apart when I had the chance!"

"Please, don't. She's the only Shadow I have left," Anri sighed. "Look, I know that what she did was real scummy but what did you want her to do?!" Anri demanded. "Accept that she needed to die so that I could save Emilia?!"

"Well, it certainly would have made my life a whole lot easier!" Subaru shouted.

"Oh, give me a break, Subaru!" Anri said flatly. "Look we still have plenty of time. Emilia won't be in critical condition for at least a couple of days as long as keep medicating her with the Blood Replenishing Potion every few hours. If we give her the antidote in that amount of time, she'll be fine."

Subaru growled. "You *better* be right about all this."

"Is that a threat, Subaru?" Anri asked quietly.

"What do you think?!"

"Fuck off, Subaru!" Anri spat. "I've had just about all that I'm going to take today from a selfish, spoiled brat like you! I'm here to help you make a cure for Emilia because I care about *her* not because I give a rat's ass about you! It's obvious that you just need a person to be angry at right now and you've picked me, when the people that you're *really* angry at are Elsa and yourself!"

Subaru stiffened and bit his lip.

He couldn't think of a way to respond so Subaru turned his head and focused all of his attention on following the twisting river that was leading them north.

"Look, Subaru," Anri said in a more conciliatory voice. "Emilia getting hurt wasn't your fault."

Subaru snorted. "*How* was any of this not my fault? The only reason that we were in Iruk in the first place was because I was dumb enough to let the Black Water grab me in a fight. And then I was sleeping like a baby while my fiancée was fighting for her life!"

Anri raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Actually, you were near death and recovering from an almost mortal wound," Anri replied.

Subaru barely heard her. "I can't believe that I let this happen. These past few weeks have been all my fault."

"Wait, how does that work?" Anri said in confusion. "Emilia didn't tell me about anything like that."

Subaru sighed. "Because of me, everyone wants Emilia dead. Her own father was ready to kill her because he thought that Emilia put a spell on me. Now it seems like the whole world is after her. This includes two Great Spirits, the Sword Saint, and the entire Lagunican army! None of these people would consider the rumors of a witch hiding out in the forest to be worth their attention if it wasn't for her association with me! I'm putting Emilia in danger just by being with her!"

Anri frowned, trying to follow Subaru's reasoning.

Subaru bowed his head. "Emilia told me to leave her yesterday," Subaru whispered.

Anri nodded. "I know. She told me about that. She felt terrible about that fight..."

"I was furious," Subaru muttered, not really listening. "After everything that we'd been through together, she wanted me to leave! I couldn't take it. Without Emilia, I didn't even know what I would do with myself. Since almost the day that we met, I wanted to build my entire life around her. If she wanted to leave me, I'd have nothing left. I was terrified when she told me to leave. I said... horrible things to her," He whimpered. "But she was right. If I hadn't been with her, none of this would have happened. She'd be safest if I would just leave her alone but I was selfish and I couldn't bare to be parted from her. And now she's lying in this wagon barely alive," He finished in a broken voice.

Anri squinted at him. "Subaru. That doesn't even come *close* to making sense!"

Subaru looked at her in confusion.

Anri scoffed. "The Black Water would have ravaged the region whether you'd been there or not! It likely would have devoured the entire Elio forest and several of the nearby villages before the alarm was even sounded, much less before the monster was killed. You saved hundreds if not thousands of lives by confronting it, including Emilia's! She never could have fought it off alone. And Elsa wasn't even aware that you and Emilia were in the building when she attacked. She came looking for *me*. You had nothing to do with any of this."

"Yeah? Well, it sure doesn't feel that way right now," Subaru muttered.

Anri shook her head. "Boy, you two sure do have a lot in common," She whispered under her breath.

"What did you say?" Subaru asked.

"Nothing," Anri muttered. "Hey, Subaru, what exactly is your plan here? How are we going to get the oil out of that army base?"

Subaru sighed. "No idea yet!" Subaru admitted. "We'll have to check the place out and then see what we can come up with."

"So basically, we're headed toward an entire fortress of professional soldiers with no strategy whatsoever," Anri said sarcastically.

"Don't worry, Anri," Subaru growled. "*Nothing* is going to keep me from getting that medicine!"

Anri and Subaru laid flat atop a small cliff, overlooking the army camp. The sun was setting but there was still plenty of activity down there.

Patrasche, Emilia, and the wagon waited nearby.

Anri was holding his hand and trying to mend some of the damage to his arm. "Alright, Subaru, we're here," Anri whispered. "Now what?"

"I'm thinking," He said shortly.

Anri called it a camp. I was expecting something much smaller. This thing is the size of a village. It's minuscule compared to Crusch's army camp but that's still a lot of soldiers and because we're in the middle of nowhere there aren't any civilians coming and going. That means that we can't just try to blend in.

The army base was a large encampment just outside the north-westernmost edge of the Elio Forest. It was a dense maze of tents and a huge collection of wagons inside a heavy log palisade. There were also a few large, square buildings without windows. The center of the camp was overtaken by a simply massive pole that looked almost like an old fashioned television aerial. The thing must have been eighty feet tall and the aerial rods jutted out twenty feet from the shaft. The rods weren't thin, they were the size of tree trunks and arranged vertically up the pole in alternating positions.

What is that? Some kind of lookout tower? Why is the thing so frigging big?

"Anri," Subaru muttered, "Any idea what that tower is for?"

Anri squinted. "I think it's wyvern roost," Anri replied. "Wyverns probably stop there regularly, delivering messages and supplies. But I have no idea why this one is so big. This camp is pretty out of the way. That tower looks like it can host a dozen wyverns at a time!"

"Interesting," Subaru mused, staring hard at the camp. "But probably not relevant right now."

Subaru considered trying to mug some soldiers for their armor and uniforms but he quickly dismissed the idea.

I know that always works in the movies but in real life, people notice that your uniform doesn't fit. They notice that they've never seen you around here before. They notice that your clothes are bloodstained because people bleed when you kill them.

"Anri, how many men do you think are down there?"

Anri thought for a moment. "I don't know. Maybe a hundred?"

Subaru sighed. "Well, I've dealt with worse odds," Subaru admitted.

Anri raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure if I'm impressed by your strength or appalled that I'm actually following your lead here, Subaru," Anri murmured.

Subaru gave her a dirty look but ignored the comment. "Anri, do you have any idea what this camp is here for?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's its purpose?"

Anri struggled with the question and then shrugged helplessly. "To support the Sanshi army, I guess! Why are you asking *me* why it's here? Malcolm and Griest doesn't exactly trust me with the intricacies of his schemes!"

"Touche," Subaru sighed. He studied the camp intently. "OK. So this isn't a camp, it's a fortress. There's a huge wall surrounding it and there are tons of sentries on that wall. I don't think that there's any way that we can sneak in."

"I think that you're right."

"Maybe if there was a distraction?" Subaru suggested.

"You want me to run around screaming or something?" Anri suggested dubiously.

Subaru gave her a steady look. "Thanks for the offer, Anri, but I don't think that would work. To empty this fort, I think

we'd need something like a dragon. Or an army of mabeasts."

Subaru suddenly thought about the mabeasts that he had put *Pridebreaker* on. *The mabeasts obeyed me when I told them what to do. At least they obeyed at the time. Should I try going back into the forest and gathering up a horde of mabeasts?*

Subaru thought about it and finally shook his head. *Maybe as a last resort. Emilia told me that they refused to attack her because I ordered them not to but maybe that was her imagination and they just thought that Emilia was too tough for them. I don't really know if I can still control them or how far they'll follow my orders. This isn't the best time to experiment. Besides, the mabeasts are a double edged sword. If they find a way to slip my leash, they'll kill me quicker than they'd kill the soldiers.*

Subaru bit his lip. "Alright. Try this one on for size. If stealth is impossible then we go for boldness."

"Meaning what?"

"We drive right into the camp and beg for help," Subaru said.

Anri stared at him. "Are you serious?!"

"Dead serious," Subaru said firmly. "We tell the soldiers that my wife was injured by the Bowel Hunter when she attacked Iruk. We're here looking for medicine and we'll trade what we know about Elsa's movements in exchange."

Anri looked dubious. "Is it wise to mention Iruk?"

Subaru nodded. "It's very important. The camp will hear about the attack soon, if they haven't already. When they do get that news, they'll consider it confirmation of our story. It's the perfect recipe. Two parts truth to one part lie. Mix it carefully and they'll swallow the whole thing."

"Maybe," Anri muttered. "But I'm more worried about how they'll react when they see who Emilia is. Or rather, *what* she is. Marrying a demi-human is illegal in Gusteko, you know, and Sanshi is the most xenophobic, arch-conservative province in the Kingdom. They might react violently."

Subaru gave her a sour look. "*Lovely* country that you've got here."

Anri scoffed. "Hey, don't blame me! The Hierocracy were the ones who outlawed interracial marriage!"

"Whatever," Subaru sighed. "We'll let the blankets and pillows cover most of her face. Hopefully no one will inspect Emilia until we talk to the doctor. They maybe we can talk our way round him."

"This is very risky, Subaru," Anri muttered. "Why not just attack the camp?"

Subaru stared at her in disbelief. "You want me to attack a hundred soldiers in a fortified camp, head on?!"

"I'm serious! You fought the Black Water singlehandedly! Breaking into this camp should be a snap for you!"

Subaru sighed. "Yeah well, there's a few problems with that. I don't have time to get into all of the details right now but my power is a little... unpredictable. The power that I used against the Black Water only pops out once in a while. I can't control it."

"That's seriously disappointing," Anri sighed.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Subaru agreed. "Look, fighting *is* probably in our future. We'd have to get seriously lucky to be able to get in and get out with the medicine without anyone catching wise. If we need to fight our way *out* then that's one thing but if we have to fight our way *in*, Anri, then we're probably already dead."

Anri looked chagrined. "Alright. That seems like an accurate if grim assessment," Anri muttered.

Subaru thought for a moment. "You need to get out of those clothes."

Anri gaped at him. "*I beg* your pardon?!"

Subaru chuckled. "I mean that those clothes aren't something that a peasant girl would wear. Go into the bushes and get changed into that robe that Emilia was wearing."

Anri nodded slowly. "I did wash those robes. And her dress."

Subaru laughed again. "How about that? A princess who does laundry!"

"Hey! A princess should do whatever needs to get done!" Anri said firmly as she walked back toward the wagon. "I've studied everything I can: Swordsmanship, medicine, military tactics, economics, diplomacy. When I sit on the throne I want to be ready for whatever problems life throws at my people!" Anri grabbed Emilia's robe out of the wagon and vanished into the brush nearby.

Subaru shook his head. "Man. This girl sure has her act together. I've got to be at least a couple of years older than her and my life is still careening out of control."

Anri returned a few minutes later in Emilia's hooded white robe.

"Better?" She asked as she knelt down beside him.

"Almost," Subaru replied, picking up a handful of dirt. "Hold still."

He proceeded to rub the dirt in her face.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Sorry, Anri but you're just a bit too clean to be a peasant girl. Don't worry, you'll get to do me next," Subaru said.

Anri's dirty face glowered at him. "Hold on, let me try to find some big rocks," She muttered, picking up a handful of dirt.

They slowly drove the wagon toward the army camp's entrance.

"Anri, is anyone here likely to know what you look like?" Subaru asked.

"No. And even if they did, I doubt that they'd recognize me like this," Anri replied, touching her dirty face.

Subaru nodded. "Good. Take your hood off," He whispered.

"What?! Why?"

"Because you *don't* want to look like you have something to hide! Keeping your hood up when you talk to people just makes them suspicious. Put your hood down and they probably won't look at you twice."

Anri lowered her hood with a sigh. "Well, you *sound* like you know what you're talking about. I sure hope that you actually do."

Yeah, me too.

They rolled up to the front gate. Two armored soldiers stood guard beside it.

"Halt!" One of the soldiers said firmly. "What's your business here?"

"Your Honor! I need help!" Subaru said in a desperate voice. "My wife! She was attacked by the Bowel Hunter! We need medicine!" Subaru tried his best to imitate the accent of an ignorant yokel.

"What?!" A soldier exclaimed.

"The Bowel Hunter?!" Another shouted.

"Hey. What's with all the hubbub?" An older man with iron gray hair and a mournful face said as he approached the gate.

"Colonel!" One of the soldiers saluted. "This man claims that his wife has been attacked by the Bowel Hunter."

"The Bowel Hunter?" The Colonel said sharply. He turned to look at Subaru. "What can you tell me about her?"

"She attacked our homestead near Iruk. Your Honor, please! My wife is in danger. Can we take her to the doctor? Then I'll tell you whatever I can!"

The Colonel scratched his cheek and then nodded. "Suppose that's fair enough. Hendrickson, you take this man to see the healer and then you bring him straight to me."

"Yes, sir!" The soldiers snapped a salute.

"I hope that your woman recovers," The Colonel said in a neutral tone before walking away.

The soldier gestured. "Bring your wagon this way!"

Subaru nodded and snapped the reins against Patrasche's back. The wagon slowly trundled into the camp.

"That's a strange dragon to use for pulling a wagon," The soldier said, easily keeping pace beside the wagon.

Patrasche gave Subaru a dirty look.

"She's a fine dragon, your Honor," Subaru replied. "And the only one we have. We found her wandering in the woods."

"Really?" The soldier said. "She's a good breed. Strange that you found her out in the wilds."

"She's one of my best friends, your Honor. She's a tremendously loyal and faithful companion."

Patrasche clucked, looking slightly mollified.

The soldier laughed. "You sound like some of our cavalrymen. Never understood the appeal of earth dragons myself. They smell like old leather!"

Patrasche gave a muted growl.

The soldier led them to a large tent near the back of the camp. "Alright. This is the medical tent. You'll find Burns inside. He should be able to treat your wife. That," The soldier said pointing at a much grander, more ornate tent. "Is the command tent. You'll find the Colonel there when you're done. He wants to talk to you."

"Yes sir, thank you, sir!" Subaru said.

The soldier nodded and walked away.

Subaru and Anri climbed out of the wagon.

"Alright, so far so good!" Anri whispered.

"Yeah. We've already gotten further inside the base with this plan than I expected," Subaru said as he and Anri gently lifted Emilia's unconscious body out of the wagon.

Anri stared at him incredulously. "You know, you've got a *real* knack for instilling confidence, Subaru," Anri grumbled.

The medical tent had numerous beds but none were occupied. A smug-looking, middle-aged, and almost emaciated man was standing beside one of the beds, taking notes in a small book.

"What's this?" The man demanded as they carried Emilia into the tent.

"This is my wife, sir. She was badly wounded by the Bowel Hunter and is in desperate need of medicine!" Subaru said as they laid the heavily swaddled Emilia down on the bed.

"The Bowel Hunter?" The healer said slowly. "I've heard that she inflicts bad wounds but we can get her stitched up, no problem."

"Sir," Anri said diffidently, "The wounds are poisoned. She needs a wyvern oil potion to neutralize the venom."

The healer glared at her and folded his arms across his chest defensively. "And just who are you who thinks that she knows so much about medicine?" He asked in a petulant voice.

"This is my sister, sir," Subaru stepped in quickly. "She works as a country healer in our area."

"Pah! In my experience, folk medicine kills as much as it cures," The healer sneered. "All we need to do is bandage her wounds. She'll be fine," He said dismissively.

Son of a bitch! Of all the problems that I'd foreseen encountering, it never even occurred to me to wonder what we would do if the doctor was just incompetent and didn't know how to treat her!

Or maybe he knows that Anri is right but he doesn't want to waste any medicine healing a peasant woman?

Subaru coughed. "Sir Healer, while we're here, I wonder if you would consider selling us some medical supplies. We'd pay you well and my sister is in dire need of more ingredients for her potions. She's responsible for the whole community, you see."

Anri nodded fervently.

The healer looked darkly at them. "I do all the healing around here, bub, and don't you forget it!"

Subaru sighed as the healer reached down and pulled back Emilia's blankets revealing her face.

The healer looked staggered. "What the devil is this?" He whispered.

"My wife, sir," Subaru said calmly.

"Your *wife*? Is that supposed to be some kind of sick joke?!" The healer demanded, marching right up into Subaru's face. "What kind of god-fearing man would stick his dick into a dirty elven cunt?!"

Subaru ground his teeth. "Sir, the Colonel and I made a deal. You heal my wife and I give him some important intelligence."

"I'm not wasting a single bandage on a dirty demi-human whore," The healer snapped. "You wait here! I'm going to talk to the Colonel! You're a filthy race-traitor and by god you will not be permitted to disgrace us! You will *all* be brought up on charges!"

The healer tried to push past Subaru but Subaru slammed his one good fist into the healer's belly as hard as he could.

The healer doubled over as the breath whistled out of his lungs, his face pale and turning blue.

Before the healer could even take a breath, Subaru grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against one of the beds.

"Why did you have to do this?" Subaru whispered to the healer who fought desperately to pry Subaru's hand off his throat so that he could breathe. "All you had to do was heal Emilia. That's it. Was that *really* too much to ask?"

The healer struggled to loosen Subaru's grip but his lack of breath weakened him and raw fury lent Subaru strength.

"Why did you have to do this?" Subaru asked again. "All you had to do was show a little compassion, a tiny bit of empathy to another living, breathing person. Was that really asking too much? We all could have walked away happy. Now, you've forced us both to come to this and I have to kill you. Slowly," Subaru rasped in a whisper. "I can't kill you *fast* because it'll make noise or leave a bloodstain that I have no way to hide. Instead, I have no choice but to just fucking stand here," Subaru whispered through clenched teeth, "And fucking squeeze the fucking life out of you with my bare fucking hand!"

The healer was whimpering and choking as his wild eyes rolled up in his head. He shook his head in furious negation.

"Why couldn't you just do your job, huh?" Subaru grated. "Taking care of the sick? You know, that thing that you swore to do when you took this job? But no. You had to be an asshole and talk about 'race traitors' and bullshit like that. So now, I have to stand here and squeeze your neck until it fucking breaks! Now, I've got to stand here and look you in the eyes as you die and breath in your rancid fucking fear-sweat that smells like burnt onions!" Subaru hissed. "Why did you have to make me do this, huh?! Why? Why? Why?!" Subaru whispered shrilly.

There was a crunching sound and the healer went limp.

Subaru dropped the body on the ground, panting for breath.

Subaru looked at Anri. "Find the wyvern oil," He whispered, sounding utterly exhausted.

Anri was just staring at Subaru in shock and horror.

He sighed and managed to put a little more bite into his voice. "Today would be good!"

Anri jumped and darted into the supply shelves looking for medicine.

Subaru shoved the healer's body under one of the cots and made sure that the sheets were untucked and touching the floor so that the body was shielded from casual view.

Subaru saw a water faucet nearby and began to feverishly wash his hands.

Subaru washed off at least three layers of skin but he still didn't feel clean when he finally walked away from the faucet.

Anri was still searching the shelves for the medicine.

Subaru returned to the cot that Emilia lay on and buried his face in his hands.

"Subaru! I found it!" Anri said excitedly a few minutes later.

Subaru quickly pulled himself back together. "You found the oil?" Subaru asked.

"No! Better! I found the medicine! We don't even need to cook it!"

"Perfect," Subaru said, fighting off his exhaustion.

Anri thought for a moment. "I think maybe we should try to get out of here before we treat her. If anyone comes in here and sees me treating her instead of the healer, they're going to ask a lot of questions."

"Good plan," Subaru said. "Help me carry Emilia!"

The pair worked together to carry Emilia back out to the wagon then Anri darted back in to grab the medicine and placed it in the wagon beside her.

They climbed up onto the wagon and Subaru gently snapped the reins and Patrasche started moving.

"Subaru," Anri whispered, "Are we going to go talk to that Colonel guy or should we just try to make a break for it?"

Subaru hesitated. "We should probably try to talk to him, I guess. The soldiers might have been instructed not to let us leave without his permission for all we know."

"But what are we going to tell him?"

"I plan to use an ancient mind control technique known as 'lying,'" Subaru grumbled. "I'll spin him a story. Just let me do all the talking and try not to look surprised by whatever I say."

"I'm a goddamn politician, Subaru," Anri said sounding offended. "I know how to control my face! But what about the doctor?"

"Hopefully nobody will notice him missing for a while."

"And if they do?"

"Then we'll improvise," Subaru said shortly.

Anri didn't respond as the wagon trundled up to the command tent. They parked just behind the enormous pole that held up the wyvern roost.

Subaru saw that the Colonel was already outside his tent talking to a group of officers.

Subaru hopped down from the wagon, giving Anri a wordless look that she sound stay put.

He stood there, patiently waiting for the Colonel's attention.

Finally, the other officers dispersed and the Colonel turned to look at Subaru, hands clasped behind his back. "Son, we just got a report that the Bowel Hunter and a Witch attacked the village of Iruk. You said that was near your home?"

"Yes, sir."

He already knows about Iruk. On the bright side that makes him more likely to believe my story. On the other hand, I'm not sure what's he's been told about Iruk so I'll need to tread carefully.

Also 'The Bowel Hunter and a Witch attacked Iruk?!' What the fuck?! Elsa would have slaughtered the whole village if Emilia hadn't been there to stop her but the Colonel makes it sound like they were working together!

The Colonel continued. "You people are damn lucky to have gotten out of there alive. Few folks meet the Bowel Hunter and live to talk about it. What happened?"

"I wasn't there personally, sir," Subaru explained. "My sister and I were off buying supplies. When we came back, our homestead was a slaughterhouse. My wife told me that the Bowel Hunter came out of nowhere and started killing people."

"How did your wife escape?"

"Sheer luck to be honest, sir. The Hunter cut her pretty good," Subaru said mournfully. "But she said that Big Zeke and Lars tried to rescue her and while the Bowel Hunter was distracted, she managed to hide in some bushes. We found her there when we got home."

"Any idea where the killer may have gone?"

"It looked like her tracks led toward Iruk, sir. But I didn't dare follow them very far."

"No, I don't suppose that you would have," The Colonel agreed. "Alright. We'll send out scouting parties to try to locate her. We may need to inspect the tracks at your homestead, how can we find it?"

"It's pretty far off the beaten trail, sir. The easiest way is to start in Iruk and then follow the river south. Follow the left fork for an hour and you can't miss it."

The Colonel nodded.

I have no idea if the river even has a fork but I doubt that the Colonel would know that either. And if I tell him to go to Iruk first that should buy me some time.

"Wait," A rusty voice from inside the tent muttered. "What fork in the river?"

A man in dirty, ratty clothes came out of the command tent. He looked at Subaru blankly and then looked up at Anri.

His eyes grew huge and his face paled.

"That's the girl with the Witch!" The peasant screamed. "The one that I told you about!"

You have got to be kidding me!

Soldiers all around them jumped to their feet, looking around and trying to figure out what was going on.

One soldier reached into the wagon and pulled back the blankets shadowing Emilia's face. He saw her hair and ears and gave a shrill scream.

Anri awkwardly drew her rapier with her unbroken arm. She slashed the air and sent the soldier staggering back.

The soldiers were running every which way.

Subaru quickly stepped back and stood next to Anri and the wagon, beside the pole.

"Fall in!" The Colonel roared.

For a moment the camp was dead silent and then the soldiers obediently darted into ranks, weapons and shields ready.

That Colonel runs a tight ship, Subaru thought grimly.

The Colonel ignored Subaru, looking up at Anri with a dark expression, "Princess Kairei vas Sirose an Ithil."

Anri's face went pale.

"I honestly didn't recognize you," The Colonel said, sounding furious with himself. "Now I find out that House Ithil is so desperate to undermine the traditional Gusteko way of life that it even resorted to consorting with demi-humans Witches!"

The Colonel shook his head. "Disgraceful. There's a reason that Ithil was a House accursed and it should have remained that way! Siros needs to be put to the sword for this treason and the earth salted so that no fruit so foul may ever

sprout again!"

Anri bit her lip. "If I surrender to you, will you let them go?"

"Anri!" Subaru objected.

"Nobody is leaving here," The Colonel said firmly. "Your choice is simply to surrender and live or resist and die."

This is too many men to fight! Especially if I'm trying to protect Anri and Emilia at the same time! Even I might not walk out if I had to fight this many!

Only one card to play: Bluff!

Subaru seethed and marched forward throwing back his hood. He declared in a great voice: "*Your* choice is either to stand aside and live or get in my way and be obliterated! I am Subaru Natsuki the Invincible! With my own hands I have slaughtered hundreds of Gusteko soldiers, killed trolls, defeated Sin Archbishops, and hunted down and slain the White Whale!"

The soldiers were all silent for a moment and then they started to murmur to one another.

"Subaru Natsuki?"

"The Merciless?"

"The Butcher of Arlem?"

Huh. Lucky me. I guess my reputation really does extend over the border. I knew that letting those Gusteko soldiers in Arlem live was a good idea. Anyway, these soldiers look like they're now having long gloomy thoughts about mortality. They won't get involved.

Subaru lifted his chin. "My lover is in dire need of medicine that I came here to acquire. You may stand aside and I will depart without troubling you further. But understand clearly that if you attempt to oppose me, none of you will live to see the sunrise."

The Colonel glared at Subaru in disgust. "You admit to butchering hundreds of my countrymen and you expect me to simply let you walk out of here?!" He asked incredulously.

"I *am* walking out of here, Colonel," Subaru responded in a flat voice. "The only question remaining is how many of your men will join the dead before I do!"

"I have a hundred men at my disposal! All seasoned veterans and capable fighters!" The Colonel retorted.

Subaru looked around at the stupefied soldiers. He briefly stepped in and out of *Reason and Judgment*. "Your men are all wearing mismatched armor and their weapons have rust spots on them. Your men are here to guard supply lines in friendly territory from bandits because they were judged unfit to go to the front!" Subaru said matter-of-fact. "I've faced far worse odds than this, Colonel, and lived to talk about it. The princess and I are departing right now. Decide if you think it's worth your men's lives to delay that for a few extra minutes."

The Colonel scowled at him. "I've heard all about your slaughter! But you're all alone right now. You don't have an army to throw at my countrymen this time!"

Subaru blinked. "Army?" He asked Anri.

Anri shrugged helplessly.

Subaru looked back at the Colonel. "I didn't have an army at Arlem. And I don't need one now."

"You must think that I'm a fool!"

"I'm coming to that conclusion *real* fast," Subaru growled.

The Colonel sneered at Subaru. "You're the fool! You walked alone into an enemy fortress with nobody to help you but a scrawny princess and an unconscious witch. You *will* die here. You should have been more careful!"

Subaru snarled and placed his hand against the massive pole in front of him that held up the wyvern roast. It was thick as an ancient oak tree. "Oh, I'm being *real* careful, Colonel," Subaru hissed. "See, Anri and me are on this side. And this thing is going to fall *that* way!" Subaru shouted, triggering *Indomitable* and shoving the pole as hard as he could.

The massive pole snapped at the base and started to tip over like a colossal tree. The soldiers just gaped at the massive object falling toward them for a moment and then scrambled to escape but they were in tight ranks and couldn't scatter.

The pole's aerials hit the ground with a sound like thunder. The roost must have weighed twelve tons easily and the soldiers were reduced to a mushy paste on impact.

The Colonel stood there trembling in shock. He'd had a hundred soldiers under his command. Now he had less than twenty trembling, horrified men who looked desperate to flee.

"So, Colonel," Subaru called in a low tone. "Feel like standing in my way anymore?"

The Colonel's face was a caricature of both fear and rage. He wrestled with both for a long moment. "Princess Kairei!" The Colonel snarled.

Anri jumped. Subaru mentally shrugged and let the Colonel speak to her.

That Colonel feels weak and helpless now. Because he is. If letting him throw some shade at Anri will let us get out of here without anymore fighting, then by all means!

"Rest assured," The Colonel continued. "I will reveal your treachery to the entire nation. You have sought an alliance with Lagunica against your own countrymen. There is only one fit punishment for such treason. Death!"

Anri grew pale.

OK, maybe that wasn't a great idea.

"We'll be leaving now," Subaru shouted, reclaiming the Colonel's attention.

Subaru climbed back into the wagon and scowled at the few remaining soldiers standing between them and the exit. The soldiers instantly panicked and scattered.

"Prince Malcolm will hear about this!" The Colonel shouted.

"Great," Subaru called back, not bothering to look at the Colonel. "Give him my best!" He snapped the reins and Patrasche pulled the wagon out of the camp and back on the road.

Subaru glanced behind him and saw the soldiers mill around the camp, shell-shocked like survivors of some natural disaster.

Anri just stared at Subaru, biting her lip.

Subaru pretended not to notice how frightened she looked.

"Anri," Subaru said. "Do we need anything else to give Emilia the medicine?"

Anri kept staring at Subaru in shock. Then she blinked, realizing that she'd just been asked a question. "I don't need anything. I can give it to her right now. I... should also give her another dose of Blood Replenishing Potion," She mused.

Subaru nodded. "Alright, why don't you do that? I'll keep us moving," He said.

Anri climbed into the back of the wagon and started to fuss with the unconscious Emilia. "Subaru, where are we going now?" She asked in an unsteady voice.

"We're going back across the border for starters," He replied. "Something inexplicable tells me that the locals probably aren't going to be very happy with me and Emilia once word gets out about all this." Subaru shook his head. "Perfect. Now I've got two kingdoms determined to hunt me down!"

"Are we going back to the forest?"

"Right now, it's just about the only place that I can think of for us to hide," Subaru admitted. He thought for a moment. "Where are you going to try and meet up with Victoire?"

"Stoneybrooke. It's a village a good ways east of here," Anri said as the wagon reached left the road that led to the camp behind and reached the King's highway.

They approached a fork in the road. Subaru hesitated and brought the annoyed Patrasche to a halt. "Anri, I don't think that we can get this wagon through the forest. Could we carry Emilia on Patrasche?"

Anri frowned and thought a minute. "I think that we could carry her tomorrow but it would be dangerous to try that right now. Her wounds are barely mended."

"Right," Subaru sighed. "Well, we need to get back across the border so we'll need to circle around the forest since it's directly due south of us. What's the shortest route back to Lagunica, east or west?"

"East," Anri said with confidence. "If you go west of the forest you'll run smack into the Gusteko mountains. That's why House Griest got so wealthy. Until my parents cut the passes through the western mountains, there was no way into Gusteko except through Sanshi lands. Or passing through the Elier forest."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Could we use your family's passes to go south?"

She thought about it. "Well, I suppose you could," She said doubtfully. "But they're a long way west. The closest one is all the way at the Kararagi border. Besides, last I heard, Griest was holding the passes against us."

Subaru sighed. "I guess I'll take that as a 'no,'" Subaru turned Patrasche east and started back the same way they had come.

"You know, it's going to be a really long trip back if we have to go by way of Rixum. That's all the way at the southern edge of the forest," Anri warned him.

"Yeah, I know. We definitely won't make it tonight. You OK with camping out?"

Anri snorted. "I've been doing that for days! Besides, I managed to grab a pair of sleeping rolls from the safe-house. Emilia should be fine as she is. She's all bundled up anyway."

"And we have food at least," Subaru added. "We just need to find a place to camp with some water for us and Patrasche."

"Once we sneak around Iruk, we can follow the river south, all the way to Rixum," Anri said.

Subaru nodded. "Then we'll hide the wagon somewhere and go back the Emilia's village on Patrasche. I remember the route we took last time. Let's get on the other side of the border first. Then we'll make camp. We'll go the rest of the way tomorrow."

Obviously, the border wasn't marked out in the country and Subaru wasn't certain if they'd crossed it or not.

They ate some fruit from the food bags as they went.

Subaru followed the river road south until it was full dark and Patrasche started complaining about wanting to stop.

Subaru led Patrasche into a small grove of trees just outside of Emilia's enchanted winter and unhitched the wagon.

Subaru struggled to make a fire. Anri had given him some flint from her pack but Subaru still couldn't make it work, forcing Anri to take over and build a small fire. The night was warm and balmy but they wanted some light.

Then Anri changed Emilia's bandages. Subaru had tried to help but as soon as Anri heard him gasp at the look of Emilia's deep, seeping wound, she ordered him to go away.

Subaru, seeking something else to keep busy with, tended to Patrasche. It was obvious that the earth dragon felt put upon and humiliated by the day that she'd had, so Subaru made a point of stroking her head and praising her while she ate.

By the time she had finished eating, the riding dragon appeared somewhat mollified and she curled up on the ground to sleep.

Subaru returned to Emilia just as Anri finished changing her bandages.

"Is she... OK?" Subaru asked, sitting down beside Emilia and the small fire.

Anri smiled at him. "She's great!" Anri said, bundling Emilia up in her blankets again.

Subaru looked at her skeptically.

"No, really! The wound looked a lot worse than it was. It was deep but it didn't hit anything important. And it's mending now."

Subaru sighed in relief. "God. I can't wait to just get back in the forest and disappear. I came *so* close to losing her, I...,"

Anri looked at him sympathetically. "It's OK. She's going to be fine, Subaru."

Subaru leaned over to gently stroke Emilia's face. To his surprise, her face slid into a smile.

"Anri!" Subaru snapped. "She felt me touching her! Is she waking up?!"

"Nope but she's not sleeping as deeply anymore," Anri said.

"When do you think she'll wake up?!" Subaru asked excitedly.

Anri made a face that suggested she was thinking very hard. "Hm. I think that she'll probably wake up... just as soon as I stop giving her sedatives every few hours," She chuckled.

"Wait, you're *keeping* her asleep?! Why?!"

Anri rolled her eyes. "Come on, Subaru! I know that you're anxious to talk to her but take a second to try and imagine the pain you'd feel if the Bowel Hunter ripped your stomach wide open."

"I don't *have* to imagine it," Subaru said flatly.

Anri blinked. "Oh. Right," Anri said awkwardly.

Subaru sat by the fire, looking down at Emilia and stroking her hair.

"Subaru, give me your hand. I'll try to mend your arm a little more," Anri said.

Subaru put his hand in hers and he felt his arm beginning to tingle as Anri called upon her magic.

The pair sat in silence for a time, staring into the flames.

"Say, Subaru, I've been meaning to talk to you about something," Anri said slowly.

"Is it about what happened at the army camp?" Subaru sighed.

"Well, yeah. Kind of," She hedged.

Subaru shook his head. "Do yourself a favor, Anri, just forget that the whole thing happened."

"Huh?!"

"The upshot is that I have a lot of power that's only marginally under my control," Subaru explained. "Any more questions than that will leave you feeling unhappy. You don't want to know what it is or where it comes from. Mili and I just need to disappear now..."

Disappear? Is that what I'm really shooting for now? What about rescuing Puck and Beatrice?

Anri gave him a hard look. "Subaru," Anri said in an annoyed tone. "Did anyone ever tell you that you are *profoundly* self-centered?"

"Huh?"

Anri looked annoyed. "I'm not really interested in talking about this power of yours or how you got it," Anri grumbled. "I'm a whole lot more worried about what's going to happen when folks in Gusteko find out that you've been helping me... and when they find out that I've been seen with someone they think is a..." She gestured helplessly at Emilia.

"What's the problem?"

Anri sighed. "There's no *law* against making alliances with southerners but that old Colonel had a point. It's against tradition and Gusteko is a very traditional country. House Griest could use this to turn other Houses or even the Hierocracy against me. And if they reported that I had made an alliance with a Witch..."

"Is this the same House Griest that reported that I slaughtered hundreds of innocent soldiers who just happened to wander into Arlem by mistake?" Subaru asked in a bored tone.

"Well, technically it was Voivode who reported that. Griest is just fanning the flames of the incident to play up people's xenophobia for their own reasons. What are you getting at?"

"Look, Anri, I get the very strong impression that Griest's credibility doesn't go all that far. The only people likely to believe Griest's accusations are people who already wanted to oppose you anyway and were just looking for whatever excuse was on offer."

Anri frowned. "I guess you have a point," She admitted.

"The only people who could report you for anything are folks who are loyal to House Griest which is already at war with you. I think most people who hear these accusations would assume that it's just propaganda."

Anri thought for a moment then she smiled. "You're right! Who would believe them without evidence?" She asked in relief.

"Exactly," Subaru said, gently lifting Emilia's head so that she rested in his lap.

They were both silent for a moment.

"Actually, Subaru, there's something else that I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yeah?"

"What are you and Emilia planning to do now?"

"Go back to the forest, I guess," Subaru shrugged.

"And after that?"

Subaru sighed. "Our partners are still missing."

"Partners?"

"Emilia and I both made a contract with a Great Spirit. Puck and Beatrice. They were stolen from us before we came to the forest. I need to find them and rescue them."

"I'm... so sorry," Anri said in a somber voice. "I can't even imagine how you must feel. Spirits are considered people in Gusteko-"

And yet, demi-humans aren't, Subaru thought to himself darkly.

"-And to have them taken away from you like that? You must both be heartbroken."

Subaru nodded. "Puck was like Emilia's father and Beatrice was kind of like my adopted sister," He said.

Anri hesitated. "And what about Emilia's curse?"

Subaru started. "How do you know about that?"

"She told me."

"And... you believed her?"

Anri shrugged. "Hey, why shouldn't I?"

Subaru hesitated. "Wow. This is just... really refreshing," He said.

"Are you still going to try to cure Emilia? I'm guessing that she won't *really* have her father back until he can remember who she is. From what she told me, being with her father might even put her in danger."

Subaru sighed. "Yeah... That's probably true. Unfortunately, after trying to come up with ideas for a solid week, I've got to admit that I have absolutely no theories for how we can break the curse..."

Anri took a deep breath. "Subaru, I wonder if you and Emilia would consider doing something for me."

"Like what?"

She hung her head. "My last message from Grandfather said that Siros was in a desperate situation. They're blockaded from the trade routes and supplies are running short. They're already hard pressed by the Sanshi army and Grandfather thinks that a second column is going to be headed that way within just a few days. We'll never be able to push back forces of that size."

Subaru squinted at her. "Just want are you asking us to do?"

Anri drew herself up and looked Subaru in the eye. "I need you to help me save my people."

"*What?!*" Subaru demanded incredulously.

Emilia flinched at the noise and moaned before settling back into drugged sleep.

Subaru looked down at her guiltily. "What? Are you serious?" Subaru repeated, much quieter but equally disbelieving.

"I'm desperate, Subaru. I need help," Anri said simply.

Subaru shook his head in disbelief. "Look, Anri, I like you! Emilia and I both owe you *big* time! You've saved each of our lives, at *least* once. Maybe more than once, I've sort of lost track lately given how much I've been unconscious," He admitted sardonically. "But we can't fight off *armies*-

"Wait," Anri held up her hand. "Before you answer, I want you to know that I can make it worth your while!"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Subaru, be honest," Anri said knowingly. "You don't really want to live in the Elier Forest. What would be there for you?"

Subaru looked offended. "Emilia!" He said shortly.

Anri rolled her eyes. "Right. Sorry. Let me rephrase. Obviously, you'd be *willing* to live in the Elier Forest if that was the only way to keep Emilia safe. But once Emilia *was* safe, I think that you'd get pretty bored in there real quick and start looking for new projects. You don't strike me as the kind of man to let the grass grow under your feet. What if I offered you something better than hiding in the forest forever that still resulted in Emilia being protected?"

"Like what?" Subaru asked.

"Come back to Siros with me."

Subaru stared at her. "Are you crazy?! Anri, do you really think I'm going to take Emilia to Gusteko?! Have you not been paying attention to the kinds of garbage people that we've met up here?"

"Hey!" Anri protested, looking offended. "Hold up! That's my home that you're talking about. And all of Gusteko isn't like that! We're in Sanshi territory right now and they're the most reactionary, xenophobic province in the kingdom!"

Subaru frowned, scratching his chin.

Anri took a deep breath. "Subaru, Gusteko isn't like Lagunica. It's not culturally homogeneous," Anri explained. "Siros is very different than Sanshi. It's not Kararagi but it's not Pardochel either! And even if you did bring Emilia to Kararagi, what then? Do you think your problems would end when you crossed the border? There will always be people who look at Emilia's hair and ears and think that they know everything that they need to know about her. You'll never escape human ignorance. But if you come to Siros then you'll have a comfortable, stable life and you'll both be safe!"

Subaru thought about it for a moment. "Aren't you worried about the political blow back? Your enemies would probably like to make something out of you consorting with a pair of foreigner witches."

Anri sneered. "Tell them to bite me! I'm the bloody princess, Subaru!" Anri snapped. "I'll consort with whomever I damn well please!"

Subaru burst out laughing.

"Actually," Anri continued in a more composed tone. "Although I would like to keep you both close simply out of friendship, candor compels to me admit that... it has not escaped me that the political situation would greatly benefit

from my publicly declaring you both as my advisers."

Subaru frowned. "I don't think that I followed that."

Anri shook her head and sighed. "My people's future prosperity *depends* on trade. We need to not only keep the trade lanes open, we need to expand them. Xenophobia and isolationism has brought Gusteko to the brink of economic ruin countless times over the centuries. We need to get over it. Before this mess started, the Kararagi merchants were coming north but not in the numbers that we needed. I realized a while ago that I needed to make a big public statement to reassure the southerners but I wasn't sure how."

"Reassure them of what? And what does that have to do with us?"

Anri leaned forward excitedly. "If I make a public showing of declaring a demi-human and a foreigner as my chief advisers, I'm signaling to the whole world that Siros is a progressive society ready to leave the dark ages behind. It wordlessly assures foreign and demi-human merchants that, if they're willing to come to Siros to trade, their rights will be respected and protected. That there are people in authority who will listen to them if they run into problems. If I give them that surety then the merchants will come north in great numbers and my people will thrive!"

Subaru scratched his chin. "Seems like you put some thought into this," He admitted.

"I'm a princess, Subaru. A princess is *supposed* to think about ways to make her people's lives better," Anri deadpanned. "A few of us even bother to do it."

Subaru chuckled.

"I can also help you recover your spirits," Anri continued. "Whether the Hierocracy is generally in my corner or not is immaterial. As soon as the Hierocracy goes back into session, Grandfather can bring the matter to the floor. If Lagunica really is holding those spirits captive without charging them with a crime, which we both know is what's going on since Lagunica considers spirits 'things' and not people, then the Hierocracy will be enraged."

"Really?"

Anri nodded. "Without question. Spirits are considered people in the north and the kingdom is holding them prisoner, without charge, for the actions of another. There's no faction in the Hierocracy that would object to taking action under those circumstances. The Hierocracy will use every kind of soft power possible to force Lagunica to set the spirits free."

Subaru thought about it. "Do you really think that would work?"

Anri shrugged. "If Lagunica wants to keep trading with the northern kingdom it will! It helps me out too, an embargo with Lagunica might push House Griest into bankruptcy."

Subaru frowned, thinking it over.

"And the last thing I can offer you," Anri murmured reaching under her collar. "Is this," She pulled out a large, ornate metal key, hung on a chain around her neck. The metal seemed to flicker with a lambent purple light.

"What's that?"

"It's the key to the Grand Archives. My family's greatest treasure," Anri said with reverence. "We've been its caretakers since before the breaking of the world."

Subaru squinted at her. "What are those?"

"The Grand Archives are the greatest collection of knowledge in the world! We even have records and manuscripts dating back to the days when the Witches still walked the land! If there's anywhere in the whole world that you could learn about Emilia's curse and ways to cure it, it would be there!"

Subaru's eyes locked onto the key.

"My grandfather," Anri continued, "Is one of the greatest scholars of the Old Kingdom in the land. I'm sure that he can help you find the cure."

Subaru sighed. "Alright. I can't act like you don't have my undivided attention now." He thought for a minute. "You realize I can't make any decisions until Emilia wakes up, right?"

"Of course!" Anri nodded.

Subaru stared into the fire. "Say, isn't it kind of risky to just carry that key around like that?" Subaru asked, mostly to give himself time to think.

Anri chuckled. "It's fine, Subaru. It can't be stolen."

"What do you mean?"

"This key *belongs* to me. It's been heavily enchanted. It can't be stolen or even taken from me under duress. If either of those happen, then key ceases to work until it's given back to its rightful owner. Access to the archives can only be given willingly!"

"Nice feature," Subaru admitted.

Anri smirked, tucking the key back under her collar. "I always thought so! It's actually safer with me out here in the wilds than if I had just left it in a safe in Siros or with my Grandfather. The key *can* be stolen from whomever I give it to but not from me. The magic doesn't allow it."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Anri, if me and Emilia did decide to help you," Subaru said slowly. "What would you want us to do?"

"I don't know," She admitted.

Subaru stared at her incredulously. "Well jeez, Anri. Thanks for making these negotiations so simple!"

"I don't know!" Anri replied helplessly. "My home is in desperate danger! But you managed to defeat an entire brigade of Sanshi soldiers effortlessly! I even heard that you once managed to kill a troll with your bare hands!"

Subaru sighed and buried his face in his hands. "That story is going to be engraved on my tombstone! 'Subaru Natsuki, Troll slayer.'"

Anri grinned at him. "Call yourself 'Trollbane.' It sounds more macho."

"Good idea. Thanks," Subaru chuckled.

"And that doesn't even get into the stories of the machines that I heard that you made. With your help, Siros could become the economic powerhouse of the continent!"

"Yeah, Anri, that's all well and good," Subaru murmured. "But I meant more immediately. How do you think I could help you fight against Griest?"

"I don't know," Anri said honestly. "I am completely out of ideas and before we met, I was getting ready to surrender just to protect my people from further destruction. But I watched you and Emilia do incredible things in just days! Emilia slew the scourge of the continent! You defeated the Black Water and destroyed an enemy camp! I would have needed a full regiment of soldiers to even *hope* to do either of those things. You both did them singlehanded. Subaru, I think that if you would turn the full force of your brain to saving my people, we might have a chance!"

Subaru thought about it for a long time. "I'll think about it," He promised.

"Thank you," Anri replied.

Subaru frowned. "You said that you needed supplies right? What kind of supplies does Siros need?"

Anri pulled a letter out of her pocket and handed it to Subaru. "Grandfather sent me this," She said.

Subaru scanned it. "Food, medicine, weapons... Damn, you guys are running short of just about everything, aren't you?"

Anri bowed her head. "As I said... we're desperate. You can keep that list, if you want."

Subaru nodded and tucked it into a pocket.

If this is accurate than Anri's friends in Siros are likely just this side of starving...

Subaru scratched his chin. "If we only had a way to locate merchants who'd be willing to ship goods through a warzone," He mused. "Hey, Anri, Siros can pay for goods, right? I mean, we don't need to worry about finding merchants willing to ship goods on credit, do we?"

"House Ithil is very wealthy, Subaru!" Anri said, sounding offended. "We're not looking for charity!"

"OK!" Subaru said defensively. "Forget that I asked!"

"Subaru, give me your hand," Anri said. "I'll heal the muscles a little."

Subaru complied. Anri took his hand and Subaru felt a pleasant warmth radiating through his arm. "Anri, if you can heal my arm why can't you heal your own?"

Anri chuckled. "Like I told you, the damage here isn't nearly as bad as it looks. I'm a really bad mage, Subaru. I can mend torn flesh but not broken bones."

"Huh," Subaru mused.

They sat there quietly for a bit while Anri tried to heal Subaru's arm.

Anri yawned. "Alright. My mana is all used up. Should we take turns keeping watch tonight?"

Subaru shook his head. "You should just try to get some sleep," He replied. "I don't think I could sleep right now if I tried. Besides, I slept until this afternoon anyway."

"Alright," Anri said, pulling out her rapier. "If you're going to stand guard, why don't you hang onto this? It's not going to do me much good at the moment anyway."

Subaru took the rapier from her. "Thanks," Subaru said. He admired the beautifully crafted sword.

"It was my Mother's," Anri said fondly.

Subaru nodded. "I'll take good care of it."

Anri squinted at him in confusion.

"What?"

"You're not... holding that right," Anri said, sounding baffled. "I've heard all kinds of stories about what a dangerous warrior you are. Didn't anyone ever teach you how to use a sword?"

"Nope," Subaru admitted. "Every time I was in danger I just kind of... blundered my way through, I guess."

Anri stared at him incredulously.

"When does Emilia need her next dose?" Subaru changed the subject.

"Not until dawn. We'll change her bandages again and see where we are," She yawned.

"OK. Why don't you go to bed."

Anri nodded. "Good night, Subaru," She said, stepping away from the fire and curling up in one of the blanket rolls.

A few moments later, Subaru heard her quietly snoring.

"I guess she really was tired," Subaru murmured to the sleeping Emilia resting in his lap. "No big surprise. I'd guess she hasn't been sleeping much for the past few days. Too busy taking care of us..."

Emilia didn't respond except to smile slightly as Subaru stroked her hair.

He sighed. "Mili, I just don't know what to do anymore," He whispered. "When I first got to this world, I thought that I could do anything but now... it just feels like everything is spinning out of control and now it's falling apart faster and faster. We've only got each other now. It's just you and me..."

Subaru shook his head. "What the hell are we going to do? Anri asked us to help her save her people. I can't act like we don't owe her one. It might even get us a new home if she was telling the truth. I know that staying permanently in Gusteko wasn't exactly in our plans but if decide that Siros just doesn't work for us, we could always move on to Kararagi..."

"She says that she could even help us rescue the spirits and find a cure to your curse. It sounds perfect," Subaru looked down at the Emilia dreaming on his lap.

"So... why am I hesitating... Because she wants us to help her fight a war? That is going to be pretty damn dangerous but I bet I could manage. Give me enough time and I can probably invent a canon or a bomb or something similar."

Subaru shook his head and lowered his voice. "Emilia, something else has been bothering me about all this. It's about Anri. She shows up in the forest where nobody ever comes, just a day or so after we do. That's the same day that the grove with that weird door in it was destroyed. The same day that we found Patrasche. The same day that *someone* left us that forged note. Anri just... shows up. She shows up right in the nick of time when we needed a healer and when I got poisoned, she knew right where to bring us to find medicine for what must be a pretty rare condition."

Subaru's voice grew uncertain. "How could... Mili, I like Anri... At least, I think I do... But how many of those events could all be coincidence? Something has to tie them all together but I don't know what. I like Anri but... I'm not so sure that I trust her..."

Anri's breathing was deep and even on the other side of the campfire.

He sighed. "I guess it doesn't really matter right now," Subaru admitted. "Look at it anyway you want. We don't have a choice. Anri is our only hope to figure out how to lift the curse on you so... let's play this out and see how it goes."

He looked down at his lover. "Emilia, I'm so sorry that I let all of this happen. I can't believe how close I came to losing you because of my own carelessness. I dragged you through fights with the Sin Archbishops, a run in with Reinhard, a fight with the Snow Blight, the Black Water, and even Elsa."

Subaru shook his head. "You were right to tell me to leave you, Mili. All I've ever done is put you in danger. But I get it now. I finally understand. From now on, you won't have to worry about anything. I'm going to take care of you and make sure that you have a happy, stable life. From now on all of the problems and the violence are going to stay far away from you, Mili. I'll be your shield against the world. I promise. Promises are important and I must keep my promises."

In a large, well-furnished room in the Griest castle in Sanshi, a beautiful, dark-haired young woman sat a small table. She was dressed in a thin black and green robe that was decorated with drawings of large purple butterflies. Across from her sat a towering young man with sandy blond hair in a gray knight's uniform. He was built like an ox and his eyes were penetrating.

They both stared at the chessboard between them. Their hands gently caressed under the table.

The woman finally smiled and moved her rook. "Check!" She said triumphantly.

The man smiled. "Excellent move, Lady Deann."

The man moved his bishop in response.

Deann smiled impishly. "I keep telling you, Duncan, your technique is always defensive. That's a weakness," Deann said to him as she advanced her pawn to continue the attack.

Duncan smirked. "Your father has often said the same thing. And as I've always told him: Just a difference in style, Lady Deann," He replied with aplomb. He moved his queen with flair and then leaned back, looking very pleased with himself.

Deann scowled down at the board and then looked up at Duncan. "You always make the ickiest moves!" She complained with a pronounced pout but she made no move to remove her hand from his.

"Can you ever forgive me, Lady Deann?" Duncan asked in an amused tone. "I assure you, I am willing to work diligently in whatever fashion you dictate in order to regain your favor."

She gave him a winsome smile. "Truly? I must warn you, Sir Duncan. My favor is not easily secured."

"Anything worth its value is worth striving for. You will find me to be a most dedicated pilgrim on this quest, Lady Deann," He whispered, caressing her hand.

Her smile deepened into an amused smirk. "*I suppose* I could give you another chance. After all, you have greatly impressed me with your... 'diligence' in the past."

"I have no higher aspiration, Lady Deann, than to be considered worthy of your esteem," Duncan assured her.

She sighed and stopped playing games. "I certainly consider you worthy, Duncan. In a perfect world, that would be enough."

"We do not live in a perfect world, Deann," Duncan admitted seriously. "But any world that offers me a path to remain at your side is more than satisfactory to me."

Deann smiled at him but before she could respond they heard the sound of heavy footsteps approaching.

They shared a resigned glance and reluctantly let go of one another's hands.

A moment later, the door opened and an enormous man wearing a gray knight's uniform entered the room. He had a short and neatly trimmed black beard. The man had a hulking musculature and looked as if someone had sneaked a bear into uniform. Today he wore a dour expression as if everything had gone wrong for him all at once.

"Father," Deann murmured.

"Greetings, Prince Malcolm-" Duncan began.

Malcolm ignored Duncan and turned his full attention to Deann. "Poppet, I have received the most dire news!"

Deann furrowed her brow. "What is it?"

"The village of Iruk and the military camp at Trolleheim have been attacked by Lagunica!" Malcolm said gravely.

Duncan and Deann shared an incredulous look.

"Father, that makes absolutely no sense!" Deann said.

Malcolm gave her an annoyed look. "Daughter, you may tell those soldiers just how nonsensical you think it is. We're still counting up the bodies!"

Malcolm walked over to a shelf that had several bottles of liquor on it. Malcolm quickly poured himself a shot of hard alcohol and downed it instantly.

Deann spoke incredulously, "Father, Lagunica has no king, the pact with the dragon is now in doubt, and rumors claim that they have recently experienced a pitched battle with the Witch Cult. The kingdom attacking foreign lands would be a ridiculous decision."

"And yet, it happened!" Malcolm growled, pouring himself another drink.

"What have you learned?" Duncan asked.

Malcolm gave Duncan a foul look before answering. "A witch attacked Iruk!" Malcolm said, tossing back his glass. "She fought an enemy there and managed to kill it. There was significant damage done to the village. Then her associates attacked Trolleheim. It was a massacre! The few survivors who managed to escape are traumatized."

"Casualties?" Duncan asked.

"Almost a hundred soldiers," Malcolm replied.

"What about civilians?" Deann asked.

"At Iruk? Apparently none," Malcolm admitted.

"Sir, I'm confused," Duncan mused. "How does Lagunica factor into this?"

Malcolm growled. "According to the Iruk peasants, the witch brought someone sick into the village with her. The peasants reported that they heard her refer to him as 'Subaru.' The survivors of Trolleheim confirmed the same name was born by their attacker."

Duncan frowned in thought. "Subaru... Where have I heard that name?"

Deann stared at Malcolm. "Father, are you suggesting that it was Subaru Natsuki?"

Duncan started. "The Butcher of Arlem?!"

Malcolm threw his shot glass across the room with a curse. "Yes! A royal candidate of the nation of Lagunica has attacked one of our villages and our armed forces! This isn't some maverick noble acting independently like Vlad an Voivode, this is a sign of open hostility from the Dragon kingdom!"

Duncan and Deann shared an incredulous look. "This is ludicrous!" Duncan protested. "Why in the world would Lagunica seek to start a war now?!"

"Perhaps it's simply retaliation," Deann mused.

"Retaliation?" Malcolm asked in surprise.

"Do you recall the matter of the Voivode last month?" Deann murmured.

Malcolm pinched the bridge of his nose. "Daughter, I have a few too many things of actual importance to occupy my mind without worrying what Vlad and his band of bloodthirsty fools have been up to recently."

Deann gave her Father a skeptical glance. "The *Arlem* incident we just mentioned?" Deann clarified.

Malcolm frowned. "Ah. Now I remember. Vlad an Voivode sent his men to raid Arlem to test if the dragon's pact was still binding."

Duncan nodded. "He interpreted their successful arrival as a sign of the pact being in abeyance and has been rallying Gusteko to march south for pillage and plunder ever since," Duncan added. "I can't imagine what he expects to gain out of all this."

"Probably just more blood of his slain enemies to dip his bread into," Malcolm said dismissively.

Deann looked sick. "Father, are those rumors true?! Does he really..."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Malcolm admitted. "But we have more important matters than Vlad's peculiarities to analyze right now. Namely, how will we respond. This might finally be our opportunity to regain Ganaks!"

Duncan and Deann exchanged a worried glance. "With all due respect, Prince Malcolm," Duncan said deferentially. "I would recommend that we simply accept it."

Malcolm glowered at him. "A hundred good men have been slaughtered and you would urge us do *nothing*?" Malcolm said in a disgusted tone. "Those soldiers were good men! They were loyal servants to my house and their deaths cry out for vengeance!"

"Father," Deann broke in. "I agree with Duncan!"

Malcolm snorted. "I'll try to conceal my amazement," He grumbled.

Deann's eyes narrowed. "Father," She said in a dangerous tone. "Please, consider this situation carefully. From Lagunica's perspective, they were attacked last month by Gusteko."

"By Voivode!" Malcolm argued. "We bear Lagunica no malice!"

"Voivode and Griest are allies!" Deann shot back. "Don't act like you didn't know what Vlad was doing!"

Don't act like you didn't sign off on it, she means, Duncan thought.

"The fact remains that House Griest was innocent in this attack!" Malcolm protested.

Deann shook her head. "The southerners have never been willing to acknowledge the difference in our houses. From their point of view, they were attacked by Gusteko and now they have attacked Gusteko in turn."

Malcolm frowned thoughtfully.

"This was all Voivode's fault," Duncan grumbled. "If the Hierocracy had stepped on Vlad firmly when the incident first came to light, that could have been viewed by the southerners as evidence that Vlad was acting on his own and in defiance of the rest of Gusteko. Instead, the Hierocracy and the other Houses did nothing. How could Lagunica view this as anything other than evidence that Vlad was acting with the full permission and approval of Gusteko?"

Malcolm gave Duncan a withering look. "So that's one vote for appeasement then," Malcolm grumbled sarcastically. "I do *not* intend to permit a direct attack against my own people to stand unchallenged! We must respond with force!"

Deann looked alarmed. "Father! Voivode ordered a quick raid on Arlem and now Lagunica ordered a quick raid on Trolleheim. The dragon kingdom has gone out of its way to make its reaction a proportional response. Arguably, they tempered their response by attacking a military camp instead of a defenseless village. They even dispatched the same champion who routed the prior incident to ensure that Gusteko could not misunderstand their intentions! Now would be the ideal time to hold negotiations with Lagunica and restore normal relations before things deteriorate further!"

Malcolm shook his head. "Under normal circumstances you would have offered sound counsel, my Daughter. However, this is not a normal situation. I fear that we may have no other alternative... than to consider war with Lagunica."

Duncan and Deann were speechless. "Declare war on the dragon kingdom?!" Duncan gasped. "House Griest alone does not have the strength to oppose Lagunica!"

"And we are already at war with Siros!" Deann added frantically. "Father, only a fool fights a war on two fronts!"

Malcolm gave Deann a cold look. "Your father is not quite an old fool yet, Daughter. I have a plan to bring the other Houses into the fight, both against Lagunica and Siros. Our House will finally reclaim all of its lost glories!"

Deann stared at Malcolm incredulously. "Father," Deann said slowly. "You said that under *other* circumstances, my words would have held wisdom. What is different now?"

Malcolm sighed, rubbing his forehead. "We have it on good authority that the attack on Trolleheim was done in the company of a girl who was positively identified as Kairei vas Sirosse an Ithil!"

"The princess of House Ithil?" Duncan asked. "What was she doing with Subaru Natsuki?!"

Deann's face was grave. "This only has one explanation," She whispered. "House Ithil is forming an alliance with Lagunica."

Duncan gaped at her.

"Exactly," Malcolm said with a grim smile. "I always thought it odd that Lagunica hadn't taken action to capitalize on Gusteko's state of disarray due to the war between Sanshi and Siros. It seems that now they have."

Deann frowned. "They have sought out the losing party in this war and made them an offer of aid and support," She mused. "A sensible strategy. I would make the same decision if I were Lagunica."

"Err," Duncan muttered. "Lady Deann, why wouldn't you seek to ally yourself with the victor?"

Deann gave him a patient look. "Because Sanshi doesn't *need* Lagunica's help. If we were even willing to accept aid from the south, we would put strict limits on what we would permit from Lagunica and what we were willing to offer in exchange. House Ithil is in crisis. Siros will collapse in a matter of weeks and they know it. No matter what Lagunica demanded in exchange for aid, Siros would have no choice but to accept."

"Very perceptive," Malcolm complimented her. "I've feared that this day would come for a long time," He admitted. "The southerners are attempting to intervene in Gustekan internal politics. They seek to create proxy wars in the north. We can only speculate what were Lagunica's demands for Siros before they would offer any assistance but given how desperate Ithil was, I think that is is safe to say that Regent Radu and Princess Kairei are now nothing more than puppet rulers, their trade and foreign policies dictated by the Lagunican sages' council. They can in no way be considered sovereign over their own territory any longer."

Duncan looked pained. "Prince Malcolm, that seems... most unlikely," Duncan objected. "What House would willingly become a vassal of Lagunica?"

"A House that faces its own extinction in a matter of weeks," Deann said quietly. She shook her head. "Then we truly have no choice. We need to rally the rest of the Houses and prepare to attack Lagunica."

"What?!" Duncan demanded.

"Duncan," Deann said firmly, "Think carefully. If Lagunica succeeds in its gambit to gain control over one of the Great Houses of Gusteko, how long do you think it would be before they try it with another House? Why would Kararagi and Vollachia stay out of the game? They could organize proxy wars in the north to their hearts content without putting their own nations at risk."

Duncan bit his lip as he thought that through. "Prince Malcolm, I say again as I've said for months, let us send envoys to Siros. We have a solid advantage right now and the war is effectively over. Siros should have no choice but to sue for peace on your own terms. We should cut off this conflict before it has a chance to spiral out of control!"

Malcolm snorted. "Do you really think that Siros will be anxious to negotiate after concluding an advantageous alliance with a powerful neighbor? They will laugh in our envoy's face!"

Deann sighed. "On the bright side, Siros's attempt to involve foreigners in a domestic dispute is tantamount to treason."

"Exactly!" Malcolm shouted. "Finally all of Gusteko will be forced to unite behind us in our dispute with Siros and with Lagunica! This is a propitious day in the history of our line! I could almost thank Kairei for her treason!"

"Hold on!" Duncan protested. "*Treason?! That's a rather big step, don't you think?!*"

"No, I don't," Deann said sadly. "Father is entirely right, Duncan. If Gusteko doesn't unite in response to this outrage then it will continue to happen over and over again. The southerners must be taught a lesson."

Duncan looked dubious. "Opening a second front in the war?" He whispered to Deann.

"Needs must when the devil drives, boy," Malcolm said grimly. "We must prepare for war immediately before Lagunica has time to reposition its forces further." Malcolm shook his head angrily. "They moved entire armies to northwestern Lagunica, not far from our southern border while claiming they were fighting the Witch Cult! I never even *questioned* their story!" He cursed himself.

"Father, you must rally the other Houses immediately," Deann said. "House Griest alone has no chance whatsoever against Lagunica."

Malcolm pinched the bridge of his nose. "We'll need to convince the other Houses to join in our war against Siros *and* a retaliatory strike against Lagunica. This is *not* going to be easy..."

Deann sniffed. "Ask the other Princes if they'd like Lagunica to be a player in their own next disputes," Deann said calmly. "That ought to get them motivated."

Malcolm nodded. "Excellent point, my daughter. And there is a bright side to all this, this conflict will prove that House Griest once again is honoring its responsibility as the guardian of order and purity in Gusteko. This should a significant boost in our attempt to once again claim the Holy Throne. Odglass was a fool to give such an honor to the decadent House Ulgo."

"How is your campaign going, Father?" Deann asked in concern. "You told me that you had a brilliant plan to put Canmore on the throne that you could not discuss with me. I can't recall the last time you did not seek my counsel before taking action, much less when you last kept secrets from me."

Malcolm shook his head. "Learn this lesson well, my Daughter, to achieve victory a leader must often do... questionable things. Accept that the burden of such duties is simply part of the price of leadership and then be prepared to take a long bath until you feel clean again," He said with distaste.

Deann and Duncan looked at one another in confusion.

"Prince Malcolm," Duncan said slowly. "Even with all the Houses united, both Siros and Sanshi have been exhausted by the fighting. I fear a war with Lagunica would be beyond our current strength."

"Have no fear, boy," Malcolm said coldly. "One day your balls will drop."

Duncan closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to remain calm.

"Father..." Deann threatened.

Malcolm glanced at his daughter's cold face and muttered something under his breath that possibly could have potentially been considered an apology.

Deann took a deep breath. "Father, Duncan raises a very valid point."

"We'll need to strike hard at first and then adopt a defensive posture and wait," Malcolm replied.

Duncan looked at Malcolm with loathing. "Wait for what?" Duncan grumbled.

"For Vollachia to become active on the Lagunican southern border," Deann finished.

Duncan blinked. "What?"

"If Lagunica moves significant forces north to attempt to contain Gusteko," Deann continued. "The Vollachian empire can't help but take advantage of it. Lagunica's forces will be split between the north and south. This should give us ample opportunity to reclaim the disputed borderlands and perhaps acquire some new territory."

"Ganaks!" Malcolm said triumphantly.

Deann sighed. "Yes, Father. Ganaks as well."

"I must depart for Pardochel immediately. By the way, Poppet, have you seen Canmore today. I would like to speak to him before I depart," Malcolm mused.

Deann smiled. "I believe he was reading in the study. He is a *very* studious boy," Deann replied fondly.

Malcolm sighed. "We need to get him out of that damned library! It is my heir's destiny to be a warrior! Not some... bookworm."

"I dare say that the two are linked," Duncan commented. "The mind is the sharpest weapon in any arsenal."

Malcolm gave Duncan an annoyed look. "Stop corrupting my son," Malcolm grumbled. "I directly blame *your* influence for Canmore's fascination with reading and study!"

Duncan looked up at Malcolm, seeming almost flattered.

"Father," Deann said slowly with a concerned glance at Duncan. "What about Lord Gael?"

Malcolm snorted, looking out the window. "That fool is no threat to anyone! I denounced him as an unworthy knave when I first set eyes on him and he has more than proved me correct. He is nothing short of a degenerate now!"

For the first time in the conversation, Duncan's fists clenched and he ground his teeth.

Duncan started to rise to his feet but Deann grabbed his hands. She gave him a steady look and Duncan slowly sank back down into his chair. His face was still frozen in a snarl.

Malcolm turned around, having never seen Duncan move. "I will depart this very night to call for a conclave. Daughter, you must gather our forces and prepare for the march when I return. The forces of House Griest and two Acolyte Knights should be ample to handle any challenges. I hope to return with promises of more support from the other Houses."

"I will be ready to depart at dawn, Father," Deann nodded.

Malcolm gave Duncan a look of resignation. "And may I assume that you will be accompanying us?" He grumbled.

"Why, thank you for the kind invitation, my Lord," Duncan replied in a near growl. "I believe that I will. I'm certain that this will greatly aid my study of the wartime arts."

Malcolm shook his head. "You have been my daughter's protege for nearly eight years now," He grumbled. "Do you *ever* expect to become a fully qualified Acolyte Knight? Most Knights complete their novitiate in a matter of months. You may well go down in history as Gusteko's slowest student."

"Such comments would be unfounded, my Lord," Duncan replied, his voice softening slightly. "Your lady daughter is a jewel among women and her tactical mind is a wonder. With each and every day I find new facets to study and new depths to explore."

Deann's eyes glowed.

Malcolm growled at Duncan. "Daughter," Malcolm grumbled, not taking his eyes off Duncan. "I spoke to Lord Huntington this afternoon. He remains eager for your engagement to be established. He wonders when you will have the time available to deal with this matter."

Deann nodded. "As soon as possible, Father, naturally. I believe that Duncan is making leaps and strides in his studies. I am optimistic that his education will be completed... eventually," She replied.

Malcolm looked at his daughter with clear annoyance then walked away, shaking his head as he left the room.

The pair looked at each other with concern.

"Deann, do you think that this is wise?" He whispered.

"I'm not certain, Duncan," She admitted. "Say what you will about my father, he is decisive, able to take his own counsel and dare great risk at need. His strategy is both high risk and high reward."

"I'm well aware of that. But I wonder if this time he risks too much. If relations between Lagunica and Gusteko flame into a war, House Griest will suffer the most. It is even conceivable that the other Houses might wash their hands of you and force you to fight the dragon kingdom alone rather than become involved in a war that they see as not their problem."

"I have my doubts that they would do that," Deann replied. "Southern imperialism would threaten *all* the Houses, not just ours."

"Agreed, but it *is* possible."

Deann frowned and thought it over. "True but you realize that the die is already cast, do you not? Father never changes his mind."

"I know it well, Deann," Duncan said dryly.

She flashed him a rueful smile. She shook her head. "Then there is nothing to be done. We must gather the assault force tomorrow and hope for the best. I expect that we'll be living rough for the next few weeks."

"I refuse to consider long days and nights spent in your divine company to be 'rough,' Lady Deann," Duncan replied.

Deann laughed.

"On the bright side, I believe that despite our early start tomorrow morning, we do have ample time to finish our game," Duncan added.

The both turned their attention back to the game and their hands once again found one another under the table.

***Chapter 19*: Chapter 19**

Late that very same night, Prince Malcolm an Griest found himself in a small council chamber with the other Princes.

By a staggering coincidence, all four Princes of the other Great Houses had been available in Pardochel to meet tonight.

"Malcolm, do you have any bleeding idea what time it is?!" Argus an Craite demanded. Argus was a thick-bodied man with a huge, bushy beard. "This had better be important. If the Witch of Envy hasn't broken free, then you'll be getting a piece of my mind for dragging us out of our beds!"

A stringy, weedy man with thinning red hair gasped. "Is she?!" He whispered in a quavering voice. "My horoscope predicted trials and tribulations this week!"

The other Princes grumbled. Patrick an Brokvar was a Prince from the northern wastes. Time spent in the many months-long darkness of the northern Gusteko winter had resulted in a House of superstitious people often judged to be not quite right in the head. All the same, under Patrick's superstition and paranoia lay an adapt mind able to see all angles and the other Princes had learned to listen to his words carefully.

"Let's not speculate," Donar an Hilde murmured. Donar was an old but still hale man. His hair and beard had long ago gone gray but he spoke with a demeanor of patient dignity and had earned the respect of nearly every Prince in Gusteko. "I'm certain that Malcolm would not have gathered us on such short notice without the matter at hand being dire. Prince Malcolm, I admit my curiosity is peaked."

Malcolm took a deep breath. "Before I begin, I must start with a bit of background information. A bit over a month ago, a village of Lagunican peasants was attacked by Gusteko soldiers."

Nobody needed to ask any more details. Every prince at the table turned to glare at the only man who hadn't spoken yet. Vlad an Voivoide was a hulking man with thin, scraggly red hair and a mouth full of misaligned teeth that always seemed twisted into a sneer.

"What the devil?!" Donar hissed. "What are you trying to do, Vlad?! Start a war?!"

Donar gave Malcolm a side-eye as well. Donar knew full well that if Malcolm hadn't explicitly authorized this action, he had at least been aware of it.

Vlad smirked. "I don't know why your blaming me for this. Some of my soldiers just got lost and wandered across the border. It was Lagunica that killed them. My men were just looking for directions," He said in a patently unconvincing voice.

"You must think us all fools to make your lies so transparent!" Argus roared, smashing his fist against the table. "Attacking civilians without warning *or* provocation?! The Hierocracy ought to have you strung up on a rope for this!"

"Unfortunately," Patrick murmured. "The Hierocracy is hopelessly divided due to Holy King Gillecomegain's incapacitation."

"If the Hierocracy is too busy to defend Gustekan honor, then I'll do it myself!" Argus shouted, leaping to his feet and reaching for his sword only to belated realize that it wasn't there.

It was customary at these summits for all the princes to be disarmed before entering the meeting room and it looked like both Argus and Vlad now rued that deeply.

Argus rumbled like an angry boar and stepped forward to throttle Vlad with his bare hands.

"Hold!" Donar said, standing up and grabbing Argus's arm.

Argus looked even more outraged. "Did you not hear-"

"I wish to hear *more*, Argus" Donar clarified, his calm voice silencing Argus. "Malcolm would not have gathered us all out of our beds to inform us of this. There must be more to this story..."

Malcolm nodded and Donar, Argus, and Vlad slowly sat down though Argus and Vlad continued to glare at one another.

"Just a few hours ago," Malcolm murmured. "My soldiers at Trolleheim were attacked by Lagunican forces."

The princes were all silent. Three faces were carved with deep concern and worry. Vlad's face was a caricature of glee.

"This is dire news to be sure," Donar murmured. "Was it intended as a proportional response or an effort to expand hostilities?"

"What does it matter?!" Argus demanded. "I'm not going to be the last one punched in a fight!"

"Let's take the battle to Lagunica!" Vlad argued. "The dragon pact is broken! We march our troops south to loot and plunder!"

The princes glowered at Vlad whose smile only broadened.

"Argus," Patrick said slowly. "If we attacked a Lagunican village unprovoked, it might be considered justice for them to attack one of our army camps."

Argus looked incredulous. "Are you daft?! I mean, I'm not defending what Vlad did but-"

"But what?" Donar asked flatly. "If Vlad's actions were unjust then what recompense *should* Lagunica have sought?"

"Can you old codgers pay attention?" Vlad sneered.

The princes all bristled.

"What does it matter?! The dragon *isn't* protecting the kingdom anymore! Lagunica is wide open for us to march in and take whatever we want!" Vlad proclaimed.

"Lagunica is protected by more than just the dragon Volcanica," Donar said in a steady voice. "It has a sizable army that's already been deployed in the north to deal with the Witch Cult. Also, how confident should we be that the dragon pact is broken? Perhaps Vlad's insignificant attack simply did not warrant the dragon's attention."

Patrick nervously scratched his face. "I say that we try to resolve this incident at the negotiating table instead of the battlefield. We've both bloodied each other. Honor is preserved. Let's head this off before it gets worse!"

Argus grumbled and Vlad looked incensed.

Vlad was about to explode in rage when Malcolm cut him off. "There's more," Malcolm said in a grim voice.

Donar and the others looked at him in surprise.

"The camp at Trolleheim was attacked by Subaru Natsuki," Malcolm said slowly. "This was done in the company of a positively identified Princess Kairei."

The princes were dumbfounded.

Vlad snorted. "And why should I care? Natsuki and I have a score to settle anyway. He killed a lot of my men at Arlem! When I catch up with him, he'll be one less problem for us to deal with!"

Everyone ignored Vlad.

"Ithil's made an alliance with Lagunica?!" Argus said incredulously.

"Exactly," Malcolm replied.

"Do you have evidence of this?" Donar said, his face grave.

Argus looked at Donar in disbelief. "The man just said-"

"I want to know what kind of alliance has been fashioned," Donar cut him off. "In candor, despite this action being highly questionable, I'm uncertain that I can blame House Ithil for their decision. Malcolm has already won the war but he refuses to accept envoys to negotiate. He means to crush Siros. I'd like to remind you, Malcolm, that the name of House Ithil is now duly entered onto the rolls of the Houses of this Kingdom and are deserving of the same respect and honorable treatment you would bestow upon any other House. Your 'total war' policy has struck me as inappropriate and maybe even dishonorable."

"War is a sacred contest!" Argus protested. "Two Houses locked in mortal combat where strength and valor determine the truth of any matter at issue! To recruit foreigners into such a conflict is dishonorable! Even treasonous!"

Vlad and Malcolm nodded fervently while Patrick and Donar shook their heads.

"I agree that Malcolm is at least as much to blame for this," Patrick mused, drumming his fingers on the table.

Malcolm jumped to his feet looking enraged.

"Be silent, Malcolm!" Donar grumbled. "If you'd simply let Ithil sue for peace once your victory was certain, none of us would even be here! This contest has nothing to do with honor or your 'vision' for Gustekan purity. It's all about Ithil threatening your trading monopoly. You're just trying to line your own pockets!"

"Agreed," Patrick muttered, fidgeting nervously. "We do need to do something about this though. We can't let Lagunica think that it can get away with this kind of interference unchallenged."

"But we can't escalate the conflict either," Donar replied.

"Hit them hard enough and they'll learn not to hit back!" Argus declared.

Donar looked Argus in the eye. "I spent my youth fighting in the wars against Lagunica," Donar said intently. "The better part of my marriage was squandered dealing with the battles between Hilde and Voivode. I lost two of three sons in the war against Karargi. I do not wish to lose the last son."

Argus had no answer to this and bowed his head.

Vlad was sneering. "I don't wish to lose my last son," Vlad said in a mocking, falsetto under his breath. Everyone pretended not to hear him.

"Alright," Argus sighed. "If not war then what?"

"A threat of war might serve us just as well as the real thing," Patrick mused. "If we march our forces to the border and

dig in there, we'd be a threat that Lagunica could not ignore. Then we could invite them to keep their noses out of our business unless they'd like us to stop over in their kingdom for a bit."

"Sound strategy," Donar approved. "Let's be careful to get our message across without provoking escalation. Are we all willing to provide troops?"

"House Griest has an army of five thousand prepared to march tomorrow," Malcolm declared. "They were to march to Siros and end the conflict but let it be clear that House Griest is prepared to once again honor its duty as the primary defender of Gusteko."

The other princes looked unimpressed.

Argus shook his head. "I can't very well send *all* my soldiers. I have bandits and the like to deal with. The best I can do is send half. Say a thousand troops."

"I'll also offer a thousand," Donar added. "If House Griest is sending almost half of its army to the border then we should do the same."

"I can probably manage that," Patrick sighed.

"I can field *two* thousand troops," Vlad sneered. "I'm not holding back! All of my forces will march together to the border!"

The princes looked at Vlad with annoyance.

"Should we send out an envoy as well?" Patrick suggested.

Malcolm shook his head. "Let them come to us and sue for peace! They were the ones who escalated! If we approach them first it will make us look weak."

The others nodded.

"Is there anything else to discuss then?" Argus asked.

No one said anything.

Donar sighed as he stood. "A grim business, gentlemen. Let's hope that it ends quickly and bloodlessly," He said as he and the other princes filed out of the room.

Vlad stayed behind a moment, grumbling.

"Vlad," Malcolm and Griest said in a quiet voice.

"Malcolm," Vlad replied, in his standard growl.

"I view this situation as... an opportunity. I suspect that you do as well," Malcolm murmured.

"Aye. But I don't think anyone has the balls to take advantage of it," Vlad sneered.

"But I bet you do," Malcolm mused. "Once war is out of the box, there's no putting it back in."

Vlad snorted. "Those pussies won't attack! They'll stand their ground and turn to stone, no matter what insult Lagunica offers."

"You're probably right," Malcolm agreed. "That just means that we need to make Lagunica play the aggressor."

Vlad looked at Malcolm intrigued. "How would we do that?"

"None of the other Princes are going to talk to Lagunica," Malcolm said as if just thinking out loud. "But if Lagunica got a message claiming that we intend to invade, say one signed by all the Princes, they would have to interpret our presence on the border as an eminent attack."

Vlad scoffed. "Those prince pricks would never sign their names to a letter like that!"

"No," Malcolm admitted. "But, do you really think that anyone would recognize their handwriting? Lagunica certainly won't contact any of them to ask for details. All it would take is six signatures..."

Malcolm walked calmly out of the room.

Outside, each Prince was met by his honor guard and his weapons returned to him before they departed back to their own lands.

Vlad brought up the rear. His guard captain, Lear, handed him his weapon, a massive, double-sided battle-axe.

"Did everything go well, your highness?" Lear asked.

Vlad didn't respond.

Lear tensed. Vlad liked Lear as well as he liked anybody but Lear knew that it didn't take much for Vlad to go from 'slightly annoyed' to 'swinging his axe to kill.'

A moment later, Lear realized that he'd been mistaken. Vlad wasn't angry. He was thinking.

"Lear," Vlad growled a moment later.

"Sir!" Lear said, snapping to attention.

"Tonight, you're going to send a letter to Lagunica. This is what it will say..."

At daybreak, Subaru woke up without ever realizing that he'd fallen asleep.

Some sentry I am, Subaru grumbled to himself, gently moving Emilia off his lap. His arm felt much better although still not as strong as before.

Subaru walked over to Anri and gently shook her.

She moaned. "Subaru? That you?" She sat up with a yawn.

"Yup, it's sunrise," Subaru replied, sifting through the dying cinders of their camp fire.

Anri got up. "I'll change Emilia's bandages before we go then."

"Need any help?"

"Thanks but no thanks," Anri replied. "If you freak out at the wrong time, you'll do more harm than good."

Anri started to work on Emilia's bandages. "OK, this is great. The wounds are mending nicely with the help of a little magic. They should be all gone in a day or two."

Subaru sighed. "Thanks, Anri."

Anri thought for a moment. "OK, Subaru, I'm not going to give her another dose of the sedative right now. We can always give her another one later if she's still in too much pain but I think that it's time for her to wake up and eat something. Her body needs fuel."

Subaru's eyes brightened. "You think she's going to wake up?" He asked excitedly.

"Well, it won't be for several hours," Anri replied thinking. "Maybe even tomorrow morning."

Subaru had a huge smile on his face. "That's incredible news," He sighed. "I can't believe how much I've missed her, even though she's still with me."

"Hey, don't get too excited. I've been dosing her heavily with sedatives. She may not wake up until tomorrow."

Subaru's smile didn't flicker. "Got it."

Subaru put out the fire and started to pack up their makeshift camp while Anri changed Emilia's bandages.

Subaru scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Hey, Anri, do you think that Emilia would be OK being carried in the saddle today?"

Anri nodded. "Sure, her wounds are mending nicely. I wouldn't go crazy with the bouncing though," Anri warned.

Subaru looked over at the yawning Patrasche who had just stood up.

"That sound OK to you, girl?" He asked pointedly. "Would you rather take it easy and not go crazy with the running on this trip instead of pulling the wagon for another day?"

Patrasche gave an enthusiastic hoot.

"Hey, Subaru," Anri muttered. "Do you really think we can carry all this stuff on Patrasche?" She asked, looking through the packed wagon.

Subaru shook his head. "We won't even try. We'll pack the food and whatever medicine we actually need into Patrasche's saddle bags. We'll hide the wagon in the trees here and then come back for it when we're ready to take you to meet up with Victoire. We're pretty far off the beaten trail. I doubt that anyone will stumble over the wagon by accident."

Anri thought about that for a moment then nodded. "OK so we'll double back here to get the wagon when we head to Stoneybrooke."

Patrasche whimpered in protest.

Subaru sighed. "Also, maybe we'll stop in Rixum and price another earth dragon to pull the cart..."

Crusch Karnstein stood before the sages' council in a private, closed session. She was dressed in her uniform and stood ramrod straight, trying to convince the sages of the seriousness of her report.

So far, this had proved difficult.

"Lady Crusch," Dore began with a sigh. "Do you truly expect us to believe that the Witch of Envy is free and roaming the world again? And that she has made an alliance with Subaru Natsuki?" Dore's skepticism was palpable.

Crusch took a deep breath. "Your excellencies, we know that this person was freed from a place referred to as 'the Witch's Tomb' in the Sanctuary. My officers and Subaru Natsuki's own faction can both attest to the powerful and dangerous magic that she possesses. She even managed to escape from Reinhard van Astrea! I would respectfully argue that assuming she is a threat to the Kingdom until we discover evidence to the contrary is wise and prudent."

The sages seemed to mull that over.

"That might make sense," Byrd admitted. "But what are you suggesting that we do about it?"

"We must immediately devote all of our efforts to locating Subaru Natsuki and ascertaining what is really going on," Crusch replied. "We can not make any kind of effective strategy for a situation that we do not understand. Whether Subaru Natsuki is a willing conspirator of the witch or a helpless captive, we must understand what the situation really is as soon as possible in order to take whatever steps are necessary to protect the kingdom."

There was a knock at the door.

McMahon looked annoyed. "Enter!"

A young functionary in an elaborate hooded robe entered carrying a scroll.

McMahon sighed. "Adjunct. We are in session!" He grumbled. "If you are going to insist on continually interrupting our councils, I begin to wonder why we bother having a door on the council chamber at all!"

Dore chuckled.

The adjunct flinched. "A thousand apologies, excellencies. However, I believe that this missive has direct bearing on your deliberations. It reached us from Gusteko just moments ago."

"Gusteko?" Crusch asked sharply.

The adjunct nodded and handed McMahon the scroll. She then bowed her way back out of the room.

McMahon read the scroll and his eyes widened.

"What is it?" Choi asked.

"Gusteko threatens war!" McMahon said incredulously.

The sages all looked shocked. "I thought that the Hierocracy was firmly against conflict with other nations!" Aghart said.

"This message isn't from the Church. It's from Vlad an Voivode," McMahon explained.

Byrd snorted. "Oh. Is that all? That blowhard threatens war three times a season."

"This may be a bit more serious," McMahon murmured. "He is demanding reparations for a cowardly attack by Lagunica. And this letter has signatures from *all* the Princes of Gusteko!"

"An attack? What attack?" Aghart demanded.

"Voivode claims that Subaru Natsuki and a witch attacked and destroyed a small village in Gusteko called Iruk as well as savaged a military camp. He says that there were heavy casualties. He's demanding reparations for this cowardly attack and that Lagunica publicly accept responsibility for using a witch in warfare against all rules of civilized behavior. He claims that forces are already being gathered and that if their demands aren't met, they'll come and take it themselves."

The sages muttered among themselves. Crusch was already trying to consider what forces could be relocated from the southern border to the northern border without emboldening Vollachia.

"What kind of reparations is he demanding?" Dore asked.

"The city of Ganaks," McMahon replied, reading the letter. "And a great deal of our northern territory! Gusteko's southern border would be miles away from the capitol! He must know that we'd never accept this!"

"It's a pretense," Byrd said. "He sent us a demand that he knows we must refuse. It's just an excuse to goad the nations into a war. Voivode has been squabbling with the Holy King and the Hierocracy for years. He's likely hoping this would get him more leverage in that struggle. I've heard that the Holy King is dying. Voivode must want to take action and start a war with Lagunica before a new Holy King can be crowned to rein him in."

"This is a dire matter," McMahon mused. "Subaru Natsuki is a royal candidate. At least arguably, he represents Lagunica in foreign affairs, if foreign nations choose to view him so. If he truly is traveling the world in the company of a witch..."

"It would be disastrous!" Choi spat. "The other nations could accuse Lagunica of fostering witches which is against all international law and codes of good behavior! It would be all the excuse Vollachia and Gusteko need to attack us now that the dragon's pact is in doubt. Even Kararagi might become involved! Lagunica does not have the strength to

oppose the other nations *combined!*"

"Subaru Natsuki should be removed from the selection immediately and declared an outlaw!" Aghart argued.

"With respect," Crusch interrupted, startling the sages. They appeared surprised to find that she was still in the room. "I submit that Subaru Natsuki is not the greatest problem. Our chief concern should be the witch. We would be remiss in not considering the political ramifications of her alliance with Subaru Natsuki but her powers appear to be growing steadily. In just a matter of days since her liberation, she is already capable of eradicating a large village! What will she be able to do in a year? The Witch of Envy nearly destroyed the world last time. We can't allow her to try again! We..."

Crusch trailed off as she realized that the sages were staring down at her with profound skepticism. "Lady Crusch," Aghart said with annoyance. "The fact that Subaru Natsuki has fallen in with a witch appears to be clear. That does not mean that the legendary Witch of Envy is free!"

"I'd like to point out that the fact that Subaru Natsuki is traveling with a witch at *all* is still supposition," Dore interjected.

"What about the report we just read?" Choi demanded.

"The report from Vlad an Voivode?!" Byrd asked scoffed. "Because *he* is a reliable source! Voivode has been trying to motivate Gusteko into attacking Lagunica for decades. We should send our own private inquiry to ascertain the truth of these allegations! Before we bow our heads and permit our names to be blackened in the eyes of the surrounding nations, we should at the very least confirm that these events actually took place!"

"Yes," McMahon said thoughtfully. "We must do that forthwith. Lady Crusch, can you send a small expedition north of the border to investigate?"

Crusch nodded. "They must move in secret. If they are discovered it will only fan the flames of Gusteko's rage. I'll need to send a small group of our best men."

"In the meantime, we must learn more about this witch and what Subaru Natsuki's relationship with her is," Byrd mused. "We should summon Miss Felt to provide testimony as soon as possible."

After several hours of deliberations, Crusch left the council chamber feeling that she hadn't convinced anyone of her concerns. She found Montefort waiting patiently for her outside.

"What news, Lady Crusch?" He asked.

"Vlad an Voivode threatens war," Crusch said grimly.

"Is it time to have the hedges trimmed already?" Montefort asked calmly.

Crusch gave him a perplexed look.

"I remind myself to call the gardener each time Vlad an Voivode threatens war. He is most reliable in his punctuality."

Crusch actually began to chuckle.

Montefort smiled. "Even in times of crisis it is always important to keep one's good humor, Lady Crusch."

Crusch shook her head with a smile. "I'm afraid that this time things appear to be a bit more dire, Lord Montefort. Prince Vlad accuses Subaru Natsuki and his witch of attacking a village in Gusteko. He is demanding that Lagunica pay reparations for the damages and war is in the offing if not."

Montefort frowned. "May I assume that the cost of the reparations Prince Vlad is demanding would be functionally equivalent to losing the war anyway?"

"You may. The sages' council is still debating what to do about the matter. In the meantime we must ascertain at the very least whether this attack actually happened or not. I need to send a small elite team to enter Gusteko in secret and verify Voivode's charges."

Montefort thought for a moment. "A suggestion, Lady Crusch?"

"Of course," Crusch asked.

"I was thinking that this might be a useful opportunity to allow the other royal candidates to... cooperate. I'd suggest that each camp send their champion to investigate and, if possible, free Subaru Natsuki from the Witch and bring him home. It would be the most effective strategy *and* the best optics for all three camps. It might even... reopen the royal selection somewhat," Montefort mused.

Crusch thought about it then nodded. "That makes sense. Anastasia and Priscilla apparently still wish to make an accommodation with Subaru Natsuki. They should be amendable to this plan as well."

"The royal assembly could simply make it a command, Lady Crusch," Montefort suggested.

Crusch shook her head. "I like to observe the niceties when possible, Lord Montefort. Poaching Anastasia's chosen knight will put her nose out of joint and Priscilla is contrary by nature. A small amount of respect will pay dividends in the future."

"Forgive me, Lady Crusch," Montefort said with a slight bow. "This situation has me all kerbobbled. I have forgotten the customary courtesies. You are right to rebuke me. Your father would have said much the same."

"Thank you, Lord Montefort," Crusch said with a smile.

"Splendid," Montefort replied. "Can I leave it to you, Lady Crusch, to explain our situation to the other candidates? I have a royal assembly meeting to prepare for."

"Of course, I'll see to it straight away, Lord Montefort. Good luck with your meeting and, as always, thank you for your wise counsel."

Montefort gave a reverent bow. "Of course, my Lady, of course."

Crusch exited the hall.

Montefort watched her leave with a thoughtful expression.

It was growing dark when Patrasche charged across the frozen river toward the village was just a few miles away.

They'd followed the edge of the Elior forest to nearly its southeastern tip near Rixum before entering the wood and returning to the village along the route that Subaru knew.

Subaru held Emilia nestled against his shoulder, wrapped up in as many blankets as they could find. Anri rode behind them.

Patrasche reached Emilia's cottage and Subaru reined her in. He help Anri dismount. He then carefully carried Emilia down off the riding dragon.

Subaru gently carried Emilia into the cottage. The cottage was cold and pitch dark.

Oh right. We need to start a fire.

"Anri, can you start a fire?" Subaru asked.

Anri nodded and gathered a handful of kindling from the wood pile. She took out her flint and managed to strike a small flame. The kindling burned and she quickly fed it with twigs and small branches.

Subaru unwrapped Emilia's swaddling blankets and tucked her naked body into bed, wrapping the covers around her tightly and piling blankets on top. Her side was still tightly bandaged.

"Subaru," Anri said, stepping away from the growing fire. "I'm going to drop my bag off in the other cottage and bring Patrasche back to the stable. I'll be right back."

Subaru nodded. "OK. Say, Anri, how brave are you feeling tonight?"

Anri gave Subaru a worried look. "...Why?"

"Because I'm about to try to make supper," Subaru deadpanned, rummaging through the food bags.

Anri scowled at him and walked back outside the cottage, muttering curses under her breath.

Subaru sat beside Emilia for a long moment. "Don't worry, Mili," he said, stroking her hair. Emilia smiled in her sleep at his touch. He took a deep breath. "Mili, I never realized... how terrible this world has really been to you. I was completely blind to it the entire time we were roaming around the capitol. I mean, I knew that there were racists and fanatics who would call you names but until we went to Rixum, I never realized how..." He trailed off.

Subaru shook his head. "I'm going to protect you, Mili. That's why I'm on this world, to take care of *you*, not to compete for some stupid throne. You deserve a hero, Mili. Unfortunately, for the moment, you have nothing better than me to work with. But I can do it, Mili. I want to do it. Mili, since coming here, you've shown me who I was meant to be. Every day I watched you aspire to change the world. You never gave up. No matter what people said and did to you, you kept right on going. I admired you so much for that, Mili."

Subaru hesitated. "You know, I don't think I ever told you that," He said in surprise. "I need to tell you. I need to tell you how much I admire you. Mili, you're the kind of person that I wish I could be. But at the end of the day, I'm just me. I can't be like you, Mili. But I can guard, protect and love you. I can keep you safe on this journey we're on together. I can make you happy..."

Emilia kept right on sleeping.

Subaru chuckled ruefully and got up off the bed. "Yeah, I guess I am pretty boring when I try to be all philosophical and profound."

Subaru sat down at the table and pulled out some vegetables from the food bags.

Subaru inspected the vegetables with confusion. "You know, Emilia, I have *no* idea what most of these vegetables even are. After being on this world for two months, that's a little embarrassing."

Emilia didn't respond.

Subaru stood up and started filling a pot full of water. He grabbed a knife off the counter and started trying to peel one of the vegetables, a round plant with a tough black outer casing. Subaru cut through the casing and found that the vegetable was lime green inside.

OK. I'm not good at this. I feel like I'm less peeling off that tough outer layer of skin and more slicing through half the vegetable.

I need to get better at peeling vegetables and making food. Nobody else is going to feed us, after all.

"Well, Mili, we're home again. Home. This really could be our home. Still feels funny to say that word but the more I think about it, the more it feels like it fits. What a long, strange road we took to get here..."

Subaru kept struggling with peeling the strange vegetable. He knew this was good practice and he kept trying to get better at it. Before he knew it, almost forty minutes had passed with Subaru trying to peel the same vegetable.

Anri rushed into the cottage, panting and with a pale face.

"Anri?" Subaru asked. "What's wrong?"

She gasped for breath. "Subaru. People! People in the forest!"

"What?!" Subaru shouted jumping up.

Anri nodded. "My legs were feeling stiff so I decided to take a walk. I found tracks, Subaru. Lots of tracks. There are a lot of people in the forest!"

Subaru's heart stopped. *Who is it? Reinhard wouldn't bring a crowd with him. Neither would Regulus. Who else might be here looking for us?!*

Maybe those weirdos who destroyed the grove?

Hang on, don't panic, Subaru. Maybe this has nothing to do with you and Emilia at all.

But you had better check it out and make sure...

"Alright," Subaru said handing Anri the badly peeled vegetable and grabbing his hooded robe. "I'm going to go out and check this out! Where did you say you saw the tracks?"

"By the river," Anri answered. "Follow the river north. You can't miss them!"

"Right," Subaru muttered. "You stay here with Emilia and finish cooking dinner!"

"OK..." Anri stared at the vegetable that Subaru had handed her. She gave him a strange look. "Subaru, what are you making?"

Subaru shook his head, still preoccupied with Anri's news. "I thought that I'd make us a vegetable soup tonight. It's quick, easy, and it's even possible that it's a simple enough meal that I won't completely screw it up."

Anri had a dubious look on her face. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense," Anri said slowly. "But I've never heard of anyone putting an avocado in a vegetable soup."

Subaru covered his eyes. "*That's* what this is?!" He asked.

"Of course. You've never seen one before?"

Subaru shook his head. "I guess I never saw one raw."

"Well, you already peeled it," Anri said, picking up some of the peeled skin and looking at the healthy amount of fruit still stuck to it in disbelief. "Well, kind of. We might as well do *something* with it."

Subaru sighed. "Let's see if there's any bread in these bags. I've heard that avocado is very good on toast."

Anri laughed then her face grew serious. "Subaru, if you're going to follow those tracks you should really get going," She urged. "Patrasche is probably getting ready to sleep and it's just going to get colder outside."

Subaru nodded. "Look after Emilia while I'm gone," Subaru asked as he walked to the door.

"Of course!"

Subaru rode Patrasche down the frozen river, looking at both sides of the riverbank for tracks.

OK, no tracks so far. You'd think after a big storm like we had a few days ago, all the animals in the forest would be coming down to the river to get a drink... except that there are no animals in the forest. There are only mabeasts that don't need to eat or drink... right. Well, if nothing else, that should make whatever tracks I am looking for easy to spot.

Subaru rode down the frozen river at a leisurely trot for more than half an hour.

I've gone pretty far. Maybe I should have asked for better directions. I doubt that Anri could have walked this far down the river...

He was just about to give up on Anri's warning as being a false alarm when he spotted some marks in the snow and urged Patrasche over to investigate.

He reined Patrasche in and studied the disturbed snow. "I'm not sure how fresh these marks are. They have to be no older than today or the storm would have covered them up. It looks like a large group of men and... five carts, maybe six carts are trying to come through the forest. Why are they *doing* that?"

Patrasche gave Subaru a patient look.

Subaru scratched his chin, "If they're carrying this many carts then they need to be merchants of some kind. Or maybe settlers? Hard to imagine anyone wanting to move into the forest but either one could put us in danger. We need to investigate."

Subaru rode along down the river, following the tracks as the evening deepened and the cold became sharp and bitter. It wasn't long before Subaru spotted a large fire burning in the distance. Subaru reined in Patrasche in the trees and slid down. "Stay here," He whispered.

Patrasche's cluck sounded somewhat petulant.

Subaru smiled, "Good girl," He said, patting her face.

Subaru stayed low as he crept toward the fire. His hooded robe helped him blend in with the shadows of the dark wood.

Subaru slowly moved closer to the fire in the clearing until he found that he could hear the men's voices. He stopped to listen, hiding in the nearby trees. There was a regiment of tents set up in the clearing. Subaru guessed it was twenty to forty men. A small group of them were clustered around the campfire. Most of the others seemed to be asleep inside their tents.

"Is anybody going to be able to sleep tonight?" One fat man with a short gray beard grumbled. He had the bright red nose of a hard drinker. He was dressed in patched, old clothes and he had a rusty sword belted at his side.

"Will you relax, Joe?" A younger man with a long face and large hands said. "We haven't seen so much as a squirrel since we came into these woods."

The fat man spat into the fire. "Young men. Their eyes look but they never see. Doesn't that seem ominous to any of you? When the animals avoid a place, there's probably a good reason for it!"

"Forget it, Bob," A grizzled old man with a pipe said to the younger one. "Joe's just that sort. Always throwing salt over his shoulder and talking about making money whenever his palm itches!"

"You may say so, Tim, but mark my words: Lady Koi has sent us all into peril just to save a few coppers! This forest is cursed and everybody knows it!" Joe snapped.

"All the better, Joe! The curse can't be meant for us," Bob pointed out, "But the local garrison isn't going to pursue us through a cursed forest. We'll be over the border and into Gusteko in half the time!"

"There are mabeasts in these woods," Joe grumbled. "Big ones. And my grandmother once saw the Witch of the Woods. She said that devils roam this forest and sometimes they come through the villages in the dead of night, tempting men into dark accords."

Witch of the Woods?! Do these men remember Emilia?!

...No, probably not. I'm guessing that they just have stories handed down to them about the other elves who lived in the forest before they were frozen.

"Is this the same grandmother who used to drink paint when she couldn't afford liquor?" Tim asked in a bored voice.

Bob waved a large hand dismissively. "We can handle a few mabeasts, Joe. We've got thirty men! There's nothing about us that should attract the attention of anything big and we can run off a few wolgarm," Bob said.

"Wolgarm are one thing, boy, but there are Guiltylowe in the forest. Rumors say that there's even a Snow Blight in these woods. Ever seen one? A small army would struggle to bring it down!" Joe growled.

I can vouch for that.

"Ignore this old fool, Bob," Tim muttered, refilling his pipe. "Snow Blights are attracted to mana. It takes a large amount of mana to get the attention of a Guiltylowe, much less a Snow Blight. That's why the Lady sent us instead of her best guards."

"You're an idiot, Tim," Joe snapped. "Not that that's news. I knew that you were an idiot twenty years ago. Lady Koi sent us because we're expendable. If we don't make it to Gusteko alive, she hasn't lost much."

"Forget it," Tim grumbled. "We'll be out of the forest by end of day tomorrow and over the border into Gusteko. We'll deliver the Lady's goods to the distributor and head back along the main road. No need for hiding then."

Bob picked at his chin. "You know, me and some of the boys were talking about doing a little hunting while we're in here..."

Tim squinted at him. "Hunting? Nothing lives in these forests except mabeasts. And mabeast meat would turn a rodent sick," Tim replied.

"Nah, Tim. They're talking about going hunting for the Witch of the Wood," Bob whispered.

The two older men sat there in stupefied silence.

Joe's jaw hung open. "Gods above. Lady Koi really *is* trying to get rid of all the mental deadwood in the organization," Joe mourned. "Why the hell am *I* here?!"

"Have you gone *completely* insane, Bob?" Tim asked.

"What? We got more than twenty strong lads with us, plus you old codgers," Bob snickered. "We sneak up on the witch real quiet-like and then: Off with her head! There's a big reward for captured or killed Cultists, you know."

"Witches and Witch Cultists are two different things, you slack-jawed gewgaw," Joe said in a pained voice. "If the whole lot of you go chasing after a witch, there won't be enough of you left to bury! Unless you she turns you into something unnatural or puts you in the stew. Didn't you hear what Tod said about that frozen woman he saw in Iruk?"

Bob laughed. "Don't tell me that you believe all that bullocks about the Bowel Hunter being turned into an ice sculpture by a witch. Besides, we have trained fighters with us. Men who do their fighting for the Black Silver Coins. Thirty men against one witch? We'll lure her out and then one quick slash will put an end to her."

Subaru's mind erupted in flames. For a moment he wanted to dash into that clearing and strangle the lot of them with his bare hands.

Subaru slowly unclenched his fists and slipped away from the clearing.

Alright, so these men are smugglers of some kind. From what I can remember from my reading and from what Anri told me, Gusteko charges outrageous tariffs on foreign products and there's big business in running goods across the border. Now it seems that these men are hoping to use the forest as cover when they sneak over the border into Gusteko. It's actually not a terrible idea. According to the map, the forest does run over the Gusteko border and most of the locals are afraid of it so it's an ideal route for smuggling. It sounds like this 'Lady Koi' has sent these men as a test run to see if the woods are as dangerous as the legends say. I think that I had better confirm her suspicions.

Still, thirty men is more than I can handle in a straight fight and I can't count on them panicking and running away while they're in a forest that they seem to be afraid of. If these smugglers stand their ground and fight then sooner or later, they'll wear through Indomitable. If the Authority's true power activated then there would be no problem but like always, it seems that it only works when it feels like it.

A cold voice from the depths of his mind commented, You can't let these men leave this forest. If this 'trial run' succeeds then more and more people will come into the Elier Forest and that will put Emilia in increasing amounts of danger. That even ignores the possibility that some of these men might actually be dumb enough to go Witch hunting. Emilia is a gentle soul. If these men spoke kind words to her, they could easily take her off guard. Emilia is a sheep vulnerable to any wolf that can put on a kindly face. That is a chance that you simply can not afford to take.

It's time that you faced reality. Ever since the Sanctuary you've been dealing with disaster after disaster because you've been trying to worry about too many people. If you'd learned to just say 'Sorry, can't help you. I have my own problems,' then you, Emilia, and the spirits, would be safe in Gusteko right now and planning a new life for yourselves.

There's no way around it. These men must die.

Subaru shook off the cold words.

I do need to face reality. I am not a hero. Being a hero is easy in the story books. No matter what stupid, self-destructive thing the hero puts himself through for the benefit of everyone else, the author always makes sure that things work out for him at the end of the day. What an easy job...

In real life, sacrificing for other people means actually sacrificing for them. You give something up and you don't get it back. That's what I kept trying to do out of some ludicrous fantasy that things would just work out somehow. Because of that stupidity, I've let my family get ripped in half!

I'm sick of trying to be a hero. It's a thankless, sucky job. Reinhard is a hero. He lives for sacrifice. Even if he knew who Emilia really was, I have no doubt that he'd sacrifice her in a heartbeat to protect the world. He'd likely even sacrifice Felt if it came down to it.

Me? I'm not a hero. I'd burn this entire world to ash in order to keep Emilia safe.

That is who I am.

Without even thinking about how to do it, Subaru sent out a call.

Subaru sat on Patrasche in the dark Elier forest. They had been standing there for nearly half an hour. Patrasche was looking at her master with thinly veiled irritation. Patrasche was born to *run*. Only Patrasche's loyalty and fondness for her master kept her there.

Patrasche twitched as she heard something creep through the snow.

She looked up and saw a Guiltylowe and a whole pack of wolgarm prowling through the trees.

Patrasche drew herself up in panic with a loud cry. She prepared to flee.

"Easy, girl!" Subaru whispered, patting her head. "Easy. Nothing to worry about. These are my creatures now."

I hope.

Patrasche still looked terrified but she settled down slightly.

I suppose I really can't blame her. The look in these monsters' eyes constantly assures me that they'd rip me to shreds if they could find a way to do it. They obey me as long as my magic constrains them to do so and not a moment longer.

More and more of the mabeasts that Subaru had mastered the other day appeared until he had three Guiltylowe and almost fifty wolgarm standing around him.

This many mabeasts could probably defeat a small army, especially if they took them by surprise.

With a thought, Subaru directed his mabeasts to surround the camp and they silently spread out to do so.

This is going to be bloody. Do I really have to go this far? Do I need to kill all of them?

Leaving a few alive to the spread word of how dangerous the forest is would be a good idea, right?

Look, these guys are smugglers. Bad people, no question, but I'm talking about slaughtering them wholesale. Is that really necessary? I mean, sure they're criminals but I don't have any evidence that they're really these horrible people who deserve nothing but death. This isn't like killing people in a fight, although that's bad enough. This is ordering the mabeasts to slaughter them. This is coldblooded murder. Am I really willing to cross that line?

Another part of Subaru whispered, *Emilia is in danger from these men. That needs to be your only concern. Slaughtering these men will ensure Emilia's safety and that your base of operations remains secure.*

It's a dirty business but that's why it's been given to you: You can make the hard choices necessary to keep your family safe. Part of these hard choices is making sure that they never have to worry about what the price of their safety really is or if it was worth it. You can carry that burden alone and ensure that Emilia remains happy. That's your job.

All the same it is a dark night and it's not impossible that some of these men could escape. Mabeasts are apt to be more interested in tearing their prey to bits than ensuring that none of them get away. Any rumors of Subaru Natsuki commanding a horde of mabeasts would cause enormous complications for your plans to protect Emilia and rescue Beatrice and Puck. No one can know that the monster of the wood is in reality Subaru Natuski.

Subaru shook his head.

No. I'm just going to scare them. Word of a dangerous monster in the woods served by a horde of mabeasts will be enough to school the locals to continue giving it a wide berth. And it shouldn't attract any more attention from the kingdom since the kingdom has been ignoring the cursed wood for this long anyway.

I'll use the mabeasts to scare them and send them running out of the forest.

Of course, if I do want them to survive then I had better figure out who I'm going to tell them that I am. After all, they need to tell everyone who the monster in the wood is and ensure that nobody thinks it's Subaru Natsuki.

What kind of alias could I use? What's suitable for the Witch of Pride?

Subaru sensed that his mabeasts were all in position and that nobody had detected them yet.

Subaru unleashed his monsters.

Bob was walking over to one of the wagons to find a bit of beer. He was far from the fire and he was fumbling around in the dark when he heard a faint sound, like someone walking through the snow.

Bob put his hand on his polished sword and peered into the dark until he saw a gleam of red eyes. Walking slowly toward him with a feral smile was a Guiltylowe almost twice his size.

Bob could only stare in horror. He blinked as if hoping it would dispel the terrifying vision but the Guiltylowe continued to approach unhurriedly.

"Guiltylowe!" Bob screamed. "Get up, lads, we're being attacked!"

The entire camp jumped up or crawled out of their tents, drawing swords. Thirty cut-purses and alley thugs against a Guiltylowe wasn't great odds but these were hardened men and they had no intention of going down without a fight. A lot of them would die but so would the Guiltylowe.

The men gathered in a clump to make their stand. The beast just grinned down at them, its huge fangs gleaming in the fire light.

Bob jumped as he heard another roar behind them.

He looked over his shoulder and saw two other Guiltylowes entering the firelight, sporting their own fanged grins. Beside them, dozens of wolgarms approached the camp.

The men looked at each other helplessly. Their chances had gone from slim to nonexistent.

They raised their swords for a final stand when they heard a voice call out, "Heel!"

The mabeasts all froze in place and then sat back on their haunches, watching the men intently.

Bob saw a man in a hooded robe ride into the firelight on top of a great black riding dragon.

The man cocked his head. "What madness bade you to enter into my forest?" He asked almost politely.

"Uh," Joe began. He took a step forward, raising his hands in surrender. He cringed as this brought him to within touching distance of a Guiltylowe. The Guiltylowe bared its fangs but didn't move. "Forgive us, my lord. We had absolutely no idea that this here forest was your property."

The man didn't answer immediately. "No idea? Are you saying that you did not know that this forest was the property of the Sorcerer King Taiyang? Whose curse blights the very air that you breathe? Whose will dominates every witchbeast within this forest?" He sounded offended.

Joe swallowed hard. "I'm afraid not, my lord. My men and I aren't too wise, you understand. We're only in this forest at all because Lady Koi ordered us to!"

"And who is Lady Koi?" Taiyang asked.

"Our employer, sir! She runs the smuggling branch of the Black Silver Coins cartel," Joe said.

Bob winced to hear Joe give up their employer this easily. Lady Koi would certainly have the lot of them killed if she found out about this but right now that seemed to be the least of their problems.

He heard Tim whispering, "Listen, lads. This monster will kill us as easily as we'd swat a fly. Whenever it's done toying with us and getting our hopes up, it'll finish the job. Even if it let us leave, if we fail our mission, Lady Koi will make us wish that it didn't. We have only one chance: take him by surprise. I want everybody to draw their bows. At my signal I want thirty arrows in this Taiyang's chest. Once he's dead the mabeasts should panic and turn tail."

Bob thought this was a desperate idea that had only the faintest possibility of working but he loosened his rapier in its sheath. The sword was his pride and joy. He had stolen it off a drunken nobleman that he had stabbed as a boy and he had kept it well-polished ever since.

"Hm. An interesting thought. Should my righteous anger fall on the heads of those who simply carried out the orders or on the one who actually gave them?" Taiyang mused.

Bob saw the light of hope flare in Joe's eyes. "I swear to you, my lord. None of us wanted to come into this here forest but the Lady threatened our lives!"

This was something of an exaggeration but Bob knew full well that Lady Koi certainly *would* have killed them all if they had refused to follow her orders.

"Where can I find this Lady Koi?"

"She has an estate, my lord! We left there but this morning," Joe gave him directions.

Bob started to breathe a little bit easier. *Maybe he'll blame Koi instead of us.*

"Fire!" Tim yelled.

All the men drew their bows and shot a flurry of arrows at Taiyang.

Bob hissed. Any chance of talking Taiyang down had vanished. Now they either killed him or died themselves. Bob desperately drew his rapier and stabbed it at the man's throat.

The arrows that found their mark all bounced off Taiyang without effect and Bob's rapier didn't even seem to break Taiyang's skin. However, the riding dragon reared back with a roar to avoid the arrows and Taiyang fell onto the cold ground with a thud that knocked the wind out of him. The riding dragon lost its balance, staggering backwards and barely avoiding falling onto its master as it landed in the snow.

Before anyone could move, Joe screamed. Bob spun around to see a Guiltylowe sink its great fangs into Joe's large gut and ripping out a massive chunk of flesh and organs the size of a pig.

Joe's body collapsed in on itself as he fell to the ground, a great pool of blood spreading around him while Joe screamed and his limbs thrashed helplessly.

The Guiltylowe paid no attention to Joe's screams and returned for a second great bite of flesh, chewing his organs as the man slowly died, his eyes wide with horror.

Tim was driven to the ground as five wolgarm leaped upon him. The wolf-like monsters wolgarm didn't bother with a killing blow, simply tearing great mouthfuls of flesh from Tim's body as they went into a feeding frenzy.

Bob heard a low growl behind him and whirled around with his rapier extended.

The Guiltylowe bit through Bob's sword arm in one great chomp.

Bob staggered back his eyes wide as a river of blood poured out of his missing arm. Bob stared at his arm that now ended just below the shoulder with horrified amazement. He raised the remains of his arm and watched it tremble and the blood flow increase.

The Guiltylowe chewed thoughtfully on Bob's forearm for a moment or two and then let it fall out of its mouth with the rapier still tightly gripped in the hand.

Bob stumbled backwards and landed on the ground. Bob saw the Guiltylowe's eyes narrow in dreadful intent and he began frantically crawling backwards.

"Leave me alone, you devil!" Bob screamed.

The Guiltylowe pounced and pinned Bob down with one great paw. Then its maw descended on Bob's midsection and he felt the beast's teeth tear him in half. Bob's final sight was the mabeast standing over him, chewing. The beast let the great mass of flesh fall out of its jaws without bothering to swallow any of it and then it went back for a second bite as Bob's vision faded.

Subaru lay stunned in the snow for several moments.

My hood is down! They know who I am!

Worry about it later! How did this happen?! I never thought they'd try to fight me when they were surrounded by mabeasts!

Subaru heard screams and the terrible sounds of tearing flesh.

Subaru shook his head and fought his way back to his feet. "Stop it!" He roared to the mabeasts. "Leave them alone!"

But it was too late. In fact, most of the mabeasts had already abandoned the men. The creatures seemingly lost all interest in their prey the moment that it died.

The few smugglers still alive were pale and shaking, their bodies lying in multiple pieces on the forest floor. They stared up at Subaru in horror.

Subaru bit his lip and took a deep breath. "This is your own fault, you know," He muttered, in an uncertain voice. "You threatened someone who means everything to me. You have no one to blame for this but yourselves," He finished as their eyes slowly went distant and their breathing stopped.

Subaru took a deep breath and looked over the field of torn up corpses.

He gagged. Subaru doubled over, trying not to throw up.

A nearby Guiltylowe glowered at Subaru with eyes as red as fresh blood. It licked its chops clean and seemed to be trying to convey to Subaru that it would much rather have torn him apart than some nameless smugglers.

How did this happen?! I never told them to attack! Did they break free of my mental orders when I lost my concentration?

No, I doubt that. If they were able to break loose, I'm sure they'd all rather kill me than kill the smugglers.

But then, how did this happen? I never told them to attack. Did I? I mean... I never thought that the smugglers would be dumb enough to attack when they were so clearly surrounded and outmatched. I never even considered the possibility...

Fuck, I'm an idiot! When the arrows came at me, I panicked. Indomitable only lasts for five seconds, I can't handle a sustained volley of arrows! Did I... Did I tell the mabeasts to defend me without thinking about it?

Subaru was gasping for breath and trembling. The mabeasts stood glowering at Subaru or meandered through the vast pool of blood and offal, seemingly annoyed that their master hadn't given them permission to leave yet.

I know that I was thinking about killing them before. It was the logical thing to do but...

Subaru screamed as he felt something nudge him from behind and spun around to see Patrasche there, nuzzling his shoulder.

"Patrasche," Subaru whispered. "Are you alright, girl? Did those arrows hurt you?"

Subaru quickly examined the dragon.

"You look OK," Subaru said dubiously. He checked the old wound on her shoulder but it was fine. "You're lucky that you didn't reopen that when you fell..."

Patrasche rubbed her face against Subaru's chest. She looked somewhat ashamed for panicking and dropping her rider.

"It's OK, girl," Subaru said, patting her head. "It wasn't your fault. It was my stupidity. It's *always* my stupidity!" Subaru

shouted the last part and it echoed out across the frozen forest.

Subaru panted for breath and held onto the riding dragon like she was a lifeline.

This wasn't my fault. It was self-defense...

They attacked me. What else could I have done?

I didn't mean for this to happen. It's not my fault.

It's not my fault...

Subaru took a deep breath. "Patrasche, you OK for another ride? We should head back home."

Patrasche clucked agreeably.

Subaru gave her a weak smile. "Good girl."

Well... This was a complete disaster. I can't imagine how I mishandled this mess so badly! I was specifically trying not to kill them! Then...

Oh, fuck me.

Well, I proved that the forest is dangerous at least. When 'Lady Koi' finds out that her smugglers were massacred passing through the forest, I doubt that she'll be quick to try again. That's a silver lining.

I have no idea where I pulled the name 'Taiyang' out of. I was already talking to them when I suddenly realized that I had never picked out a name for myself and I started frantically trying to think of names to use.

I don't know what Taiyang means. I think that Taiyang was a Chinese sun god? Maybe?

I can't remember. It just popped into my head and I rolled with it. I suppose a Sun God is a pretty good name to apply to the Witch of Pride.

Or maybe I should just stop trying to rationalize a really dumb name. They're all dead so it's not like I'm committed to calling myself Taiyang anymore. Next time, I'll come up with a better name.

I need to keep what I did quiet. Emilia will freak out if she finds out that I almost got shot by a dozen arrows.

I'll just tell her that the mabeasts did all the work and I stood back and watched. It's not exactly a lie.

Subaru climbed back onto Patrasche. He glanced down at the mabeasts who were cleaning their bloody fur in the snow.

I'd give anything to be able to tell the lot of you to go away and never come back, Subaru thought grimly. For their part, the mabeasts seemed no fonder of Subaru now that they'd had a good meal, or at least some sport, than they had been before.

Subaru sighed. *Like it or not, I need them. They're all I have to work with right now.*

"Thanks for all the help, guys," Subaru muttered to the belligerent mabeasts. "You can go home now."

Subaru was exhausted when he returned to the cottage. He'd left Patrasche standing outside while he checked on Emilia and Anri.

Emilia was still asleep in bed and Anri was sitting in a chair beside her.

"Subaru," Anri said, jumping up. "What happened? Did you find the men?"

Subaru nodded wearily. "Yeah. A bunch of smugglers. About thirty of them in fact who were trying to use the forest as a shortcut into Gusteko."

Anri's face grew concerned. "Subaru, what are you going to do? If people start coming into the forest, you and Emilia won't be safe here for very long. We'll need to head toward Siros immediately."

Subaru snorted, ignoring her less than subtle hint. "Don't worry about it."

Anri looked incredulous. "Subaru! What if those smugglers saw the village?!"

"They might have but they won't be seeing anything else ever again," Subaru sighed, the field of ripped up corpses flashing before his eyes. "Or telling anyone about it for that matter."

Anri's eyes widened.

Subaru shook off the image of the corpse field and rubbed his eyes. "I'm exhausted. Hang on a second, I'm going to put Patrasche in the stable."

"I'll do that," Anri asserted. "You stay here. I could use a walk before bed anyway. I'll talk to you both in the morning. I got Emilia to drink some of the soup while she slept. There's still some left if you want any."

"Thanks, Anri," Subaru called. "Goodnight."

"Night," Anri slipped outside and closed the door.

Subaru heaved a great sigh. "I know that I need to eat something," Subaru said to nobody, "But honestly, I think I'd rather just go to sleep and forget about the last few days. They've been pretty rough."

Subaru went over to the pot on the counter and poured himself a bowl of soup.

He walked over to the bed and sat down on a chair next to Emilia while he ate.

"Hm. This is good," Subaru said in surprise. "Is there anything Anri can't do? That girl is really starting to make me feel in adequate! Honestly, if not for Felt, I'd suggest that she start dating Reinhard!"

Subaru chuckled briefly but it sounded weak and forced even to him. The smile fell off his face. "I guess I'm not ready to make jokes about them yet. I'm still pretty fucking pissed about what happened..."

Subaru rubbed his face. "Mili, I know what you'd say. I know that they meant well but I also know that they *meant* to kill you! Even if I was sure that they wouldn't try to do it again, I don't know if I could ever... forget about what happened..."

Subaru shook his head as he finished the soup. He brought the bowl over to the sink to clean it. "Well, I guess it's not really an issue right now. If I see Red again anytime soon, there'll definitely be a fight. A fight that I'll lose in a matter of seconds and then you'll..."

Subaru slammed the almost empty bowl into the sink with unreasonable force. He took a deep breath and the proceeded to scrub the bowl. When he finished cleaning the bowl, he dumped out what little was left in the pot and scrubbed that as well.

Subaru took his clothes off and climbed into bed beside Emilia. The bandages covering her side ensured that Subaru didn't forget what state she was in.

What do I do? Normally I'd wrap my arms around her while we slept but maybe she's too fragile for that right now.

Should I even be in bed with her? Although there aren't a ton of other options for places to sleep. I doubt that Anri wants me to sleep with her.

Subaru was still mulling this over when he fell asleep.

As sleep took him, his mind mused on a final thought: *How did Anri get far enough out of the village to find those tracks? And so quickly? She didn't have nearly enough time to walk that far. And why didn't I see any sign of her tracks when I was coming back to the village?*

Unfortunately, Subaru would have forgotten these questions by morning.

Subaru woke up early the next morning, feeling well rested for the first time in days.

He opened his eyes and stared at Emilia's beautiful face for several moments before realizing that she was looking back at him.

"Subaru?" She whispered. "How did we get back here?"

"Emilia!" Subaru shouted, sitting up in bed, instantly wide awake. "Are you alright?!"

Emilia thought for a moment as she sat up. "I think so," She murmured. "What happened?"

Subaru looked awkward. "So, this is kind of a long story. It starts with the fight with Elsa."

"Elsa...?" Emilia whispered. Her eyes widened. "Yes! I remember now! I fought Elsa! I... I defeated the Bowel Hunter..." She said in astonishment.

Subaru hung his head and looked away. "Mili," He whispered. "I am so, *so* sorry."

Emilia cocked her head in confusion.

Subaru's face was filled with guilt. "When you really needed me, I wasn't there to help you. You were in danger and I was sick in bed like a kid with a runny nose," Subaru grated, disgusted with himself. "I'm so sorry. This mess was all my fault."

Emilia stared at Subaru in shock. "Subaru, that wasn't your fault," She assured him. "You were ill because you'd already saved me from the Black Water! You can't do everything by yourself. Besides," She chuckled. "This gave me a chance to protect you for a change!"

Subaru sighed. "Seems to me that you've been doing *most* of the protecting lately."

Emilia shook her head smiling. "It's alright, Subaru. We're together and safe now. That's what matters." Emilia paused and looked up at the ceiling. "I... defeated the Bowel Hunter," She said in a tone almost of wonder.

Subaru looked uncomfortable. "Emilia," He said slowly. "About... that fight we had the other day..."

Emilia's eyes widened and she looked away, biting her lip.

For a long moment, neither one said anything.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I was wrong," He apologized.

"You were right," Emilia sighed at the same time.

They looked at each other in confusion.

Subaru shook his head. "No, Mili. What I said about Puck and the villagers, I was... way out of line. I took out all my frustrations on you and that's inexcusable. I hope that you'll forgive me."

Emilia pulled her knees to her chest and looked down moodily. "Well, you weren't wrong though. I thought that you deserved better than to be stuck here with me so I decided that the best thing for me to do would be to send you away even if it hurt. But I never asked you what you wanted. Or took the time to realize that by forcing us apart, I would be hurting you too... I'm sorry..."

Subaru sighed, "We've... both been under a ton of stress the past few days."

Emilia nodded wearily, "It feels like I left the capitol lifetimes ago."

Subaru coughed, "I'm not saying that let's forget about it because... maybe we can learn something from what happened and be better next time we're both stressed out and arguing. But do you think that you'd be willing to forgive me?"

Emilia smiled at him, "Of course I will. Will you forgive me?"

"Obviously!"

They smiled at each other for a moment then Emilia urged him on. "Finish the story, Subaru. What happened after I fought Elsa?" Emilia asked.

Subaru thought for a moment. "Well, Elsa had got you pretty good with her knives..."

Emilia reached under the covers and winced as she rubbed the huge bandage wrapped around her side.

"As you probably remember, Elsa's daggers are poisoned and you were in a really bad way because your wound wouldn't close."

"Wait, what about Victoire? She was wounded too!"

Subaru growled, "Victoire was *fine* because that bitch decided to drink all of the antidote herself. And I'm just dying to have a nice, long talk with her about that..."

Emilia frowned. "If she drank all of the antidote than how did I survive?"

Subaru rolled his eyes. "After Victoire pigged out on the antidote, we needed to find more medicine. Anri sent Victoire off to deliver some letters or something, probably to prevent me from killing her when I found out what she did. Anri and I went to find the antidote. We visited a Sanshi army camp and we managed to talk our way in. We *almost* managed to talk our way back out with the medicine but our famous bad luck intervened," Subaru sighed.

"What does that mean?" Emilia asked.

"The soldiers figured out who we were," Subaru grumbled. "Someone from Iruk had shown up and reported what happened and he identified us. We were seriously outnumbered and we had to fight our way out."

"Are you and Anri alright?!"

"We're both fine," Subaru sighed. "The forces of Sanshi? They didn't have such a good day."

"Subaru, how did you get out of that situation if you were so outnumbered?"

Subaru sighed. "I used my Authority," He whispered. "And well... that's pretty much all she wrote."

Emilia furrowed her brow, looking at Subaru in concern. She seemed to debate her next words. Finally she shook her head and asked. "What happened next?"

Subaru shrugged. "Not much honestly. We camped out in the woods the night after we raided the army camp and we came back here late last night."

"Where's Anri?" Emilia asked in concern.

"She's fine," Subaru shrugged. "She's sleeping in the other cottage again."

"I'll have to thank her for everything she's done for us," Emilia mused. "We need to do something nice for her."

Subaru hesitated. "Yeah..."

Not yet. We'll talk about Anri's war later. Emilia just woke up. It's too much to dump on her right now.

"Well, you haven't eaten in days so I bet your hungry!" Subaru said, climbing out of bed and pulling his clothes on. The sun shone bright and clear and the near constant cloud cover over the forest had dissipated.

Emilia smiled. "Famished!"

"I'll make breakfast," Subaru volunteered.

"I'll help you," Emilia said, climbing out of bed.

Subaru gently restrained her. "Why don't you just stay in bed for now. It's cold in the cottage. Give it a chance to warm up first. Besides, you've got to be tired after the past few days."

Emilia stared at him. "Subaru, I can endure the cold much better than you can. And I *slept* through the past few days."

Subaru shrugged, picking her feet up and tucking a baffled Emilia back under the covers. "You've been through a lot lately and your body is still healing. Don't rush it, is all I'm saying."

Emilia looked at him incredulously. "Subaru, this isn't about fighting an enemy! This is making breakfast!" Emilia protested, climbing out of bed again.

"Mili! I-"

"I feel fine, Subaru," Emilia said firmly. "I'm perfectly capable of helping you make breakfast."

Subaru sighed as Emilia pulled her clothes over the huge bandages. She walked past him and began to inspect the food bags looking for something they could cook.

"Subaru, I think this is porridge," Emilia said, pulling something out of the bag.

Subaru stared down at the bag that she held in her hands. It was filled with something that reminded Subaru of plain cereal flakes.

"OK, Mili. Well, I'm really glad that you told me this was porridge because I never would have guessed that otherwise. Do you know how to cook it?"

Emilia flushed. "Not really."

"Me neither! OK, time to start our next big adventure: cooking!"

Emilia gave him a funny look. "This is our next big adventure?"

"Yeah. And frankly, I think it might be one of my favorites," Subaru replied. "Remember, it's very rare when you get injured by cooking something improperly. Believe me, I like our quest to make porridge way more than I enjoyed dealing with Snow Blights, Archbishops, and murderous soldiers!"

Emilia snorted with laughter.

"Any thoughts on how we start?" Subaru asked.

"Umm. I think we fill a pot with water and then we cook it over the fire?" Emilia suggested. "Sorry. I wasn't really paying attention when Mother Fortuna used to make porridge."

"Oh, that's alright, Mili. We're smart and resourceful people. We can figure this out! Want to grab the pot?"

Emilia walked over to the counter and pulled out a large pot. She filled it with water from the sink.

Emilia carried the pot over to the fire pit. Meanwhile, Subaru gathered some more kindling and sticks from a nearby stack of wood lying in the corner. He began to dump them into the faint embers lying in fire pit. The fire slowly began to grow.

Emilia hung the pot on a beam over the fire pit. "I think you should put the porridge in now."

Subaru took the bag and unceremoniously dumped it the porridge into the pot. The pot began to overflow.

"Oops. I think I put too much water in it," Emilia said, shamefaced. "Puck says that I'm not a very good cook," Emilia confessed.

"Yeah, Beako was telling me the same thing. But hey, we'll learn together, right?"

Emilia nodded.

"So, any idea what we do now?"

"Um. Stir it and wait for it to cook?"

"Sounds good. Um, Mili, how will we know when it's done cooking?"

"I don't know!"

The pot bubbled and continued to overflow.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Subaru called.

Anri opened the door and froze there in shock, staring at the strange scene unfolding before her. "*What* are you doing?!"

Breakfast was badly burned porridge but it was edible.

Anri had managed to salvage the porridge and they'd all had a filling breakfast.

After they'd all finished eating, Anri changed Emilia's bandages.

"Your wound is healing nicely, Mili," Anri said, after she'd finished redressing the wound. "But I think maybe we should give you one more day of recovery before we take the bandages off."

"I thought you said that she'd be all better today!" Subaru said in sudden worry.

Anri gave him a strange look. "She's recovering very well, Subaru. But wounds take time to heal. I think that she *would* be fine if we really needed to take the bandages off today but why take chances?"

Emilia nodded. "That makes sense. They're not very uncomfortable," She assured them.

"Anri," Emilia murmured. "I'm guessing that you want to meet up with Victoire as quickly as possible."

Anri nodded. "She should be waiting for us in Stoneybrooke. We have a safe-house just outside the city."

"Where's that?" Emilia asked.

"It's north of Ganaks, just across the border into Gusteko," Anri replied.

"Hold on! There's no reason to rush, right?" Subaru protested.

Anri stared at him. "Actually, there kind of *is* a reason to rush, Subaru," Anri said in a disbelieving tone. "I've got this little 'war' going on, remember?"

Subaru made a face. "Look, if Emilia will have her bandages off in the morning then... let's just... head out to see Victoire tomorrow," Subaru suggested.

Emilia gave Subaru an incredulous look. "Subaru, I feel completely fine!"

Anri nodded. "She's perfectly safe to travel!"

Subaru shrugged. "Hey, like you said, why take chances if we don't have to! If she'll be all better tomorrow anyway, what do we really lose by making sure that she's completely mended before we leave the forest? You never know what's going to happen out there. *Especiall*y to us," He added.

Emilia looked annoyed. "Subaru, I'm fine!"

"You're *almost* fine," Subaru corrected mildly. "But you *will* be fine tomorrow so... why don't we just go tomorrow?"

"Subaru," Emilia protested, rolling her eyes.

"Hey! I just... don't want to take any chances with you, Mili," He whispered, wrapping his arms around her. "I almost lost you once already. We've been taking lots of chances the past few weeks. Most of the fights we've been in have been really close calls. If we'd been just a little bit slower or if we'd tired out a little bit quicker, we'd be dead. I just think we should make sure we're at one hundred percent before we leave the forest..."

Emilia looked up at him with mingled annoyance and sympathy. Finally, she laid her head against his shoulder with a resigned sigh. "Fine, Subaru. We'll wait until tomorrow."

"Great!" Subaru said cheerfully.

Emilia looked at Subaru with clear annoyance and shook her head. "Anri, I'll do the dishes since you did most of the cooking."

Subaru broke in. "I can do that-"

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted in an exasperated tone. "I can do the dishes myself!"

Subaru looked shocked at her tone. "Mili, I was just trying to help..."

Emilia shook her head. "I know, Subaru," She murmured, her voice sounding resigned. She walked over to the sink and began to wash the dishes.

Subaru scratched his head in confusion. Anri walked over to Subaru.

Anri glanced at Emilia and then lowered her voice, trying to make it look like they were discussing something else. "Subaru, don't you think that you're being, well... a little overprotective?"

Subaru looked at her incredulously. "She almost died, Anri! No, I don't think that I'm being 'overprotective!'" He hissed.

Anri folded her good arm across her chest, looking offended by his tone.

Subaru sighed. "Look, Anri," He murmured in a more conciliatory tone, "Will one day really make *that* big of a difference?"

"Uh, yeah! It could!" Anri hissed back. "This is a *war* and people are dying everyday! But more importantly, there is absolutely no reason that Emilia will be any safer traveling tomorrow than she is today. You trying to keep her here is irrational."

"Then I'll be irrational," He growled.

"Subaru," Anri shook her head.

"Anri, do you have any idea how close I came to losing her?" Subaru snapped.

"Probably better than you do," Anri whispered back. "But you didn't lose her! She's fine!"

Subaru scowled at her. "Anri, Emilia is my everything. I'm not going to take any chances with her ever again. The only reason she had to fight Elsa was because I dropped the ball. I won't make that mistake again. I'm going to make sure that Emilia is completely safe from now on!"

"Yeah, that's a really nice plan, Subaru," Anri said in a faintly mocking voice. "But you can't just wrap your girlfriend up in lamb's wool for the rest of her life because you're afraid that she'll prick her little finger!"

"Yeah, thanks for that," Subaru whispered. "I'll be sure to let you know if I'm looking for any more love advice from a fifteen year old!"

Anri glowered at Subaru. Her eyes glinted like ice as she brushed past Subaru and helped Emilia do the dishes.

Emilia gave Subaru an annoyed glance and he belatedly realized that she had heard every word they'd said...

After they had finished the dishes, Anri had gone back to the other cottage in a bit of a huff. Emilia sat on the bed looking at Subaru with annoyance.

Subaru scratched his chin. *OK. I'm not sure why staying in her own home for another day is bothering Emilia but I'm not dumb enough to ignore it either.*

"Sooo," Subaru mused. "I'm guessing you don't feel like going back to bed?"

Emilia glared at him.

"Right," Subaru coughed. "Any thoughts on what you *do* feel like doing today?"

Emilia frowned thoughtfully.

"This could be great!" Subaru said cheerfully, sitting down beside her. "We have an extra day when we can actually just relax. What do you think we should do?"

Emilia didn't answer immediately. Finally she sighed. "Well, I have a few chores I really need to get done before we leave again. Especially," She added in a sad tone. "If we might end up heading toward Siros with Anri since we might be gone for a long time..."

Subaru gently took her hand in his. "Of course. Just tell me what needs to get done, I'll take care of everything," He promised.

Emilia smiled. "That's sweet of you, Subaru, but I'm feeling fine. We should get everything done in half the time if we're working together."

Subaru shrugged. "Why not just give me a list of tasks? I can take care of it all and you don't need to strain yourself."

Emilia blinked. "*Strain* myself? Subaru, I'm *much* stronger than you are! I used to do all of these chores nearly every day and all on my own!" She said in exasperation.

"Sure but that wound won't feel good if you take it out into the cold," He urged.

Emilia closed her eyes and seemed to count to ten. "I'll be fine, Subaru," She sighed. "I have an injury. I'm not a cripple. You don't need to do everything for me." Emilia thought for a moment. "Actually, why don't *you* stay here and make plans for tomorrow with Anri? I can go take care of all the chores by myself."

"Oh no!" Subaru objected immediately.

"And why not?" Emilia asked in a dangerous voice. "Why shouldn't I do the same things I've always done before?"

"Emilia, you just had a traumatic injury!" Subaru protested.

"Which is healing! Subaru, I got hurt in a fight! I'm not an invalid! Why are you suddenly treating me like I'm made of porcelain and that I might shatter if you handle me roughly!"

"I'm not! I'm just... being careful," Subaru muttered.

"Careful?"

Subaru sighed. "I lost Beatrice and Puck. And I almost lost you too. You got hurt because I was passed out in bed when one of our enemies showed up," He said, hanging his head. "You got hurt because I wasn't there when you need me..."

A flicker of sympathy broke through Emilia's annoyed expression and she took his hand. "Subaru, you're not going to lose me," She whispered.

"Damn straight, I'm not," Subaru growled, staring down at the floor.

Emilia blinked.

Subaru put on a bright smile. "So let's go take care of those chores!" Subaru said getting up. "This is really going to be my first time seeing the village!"

Subaru got to his feet and grabbed her hands.

"Come on, Mili! I want to see the village! I've been waiting for this almost since the day we met!" Subaru cheered.

Emilia looked up at him in surprise and began to smile.

"Subaru, this was the 'Princess Tower.'"

Subaru frowned at the small, stone hut-like structure that Emilia had led him to. It reminded Subaru of a root cellar or an abandoned hovel of some kind. It was built under the roots of a tree and there was a door in the side that appeared to have an enormous number of locks.

I'm not sure if I ever saw anything that looks less like a tower in my life, much less anything having to do with princesses. This looks like the kind of place they'd lock up children for misbehaving in some orphanage.

Subaru gamely bent over and peered into the tiny 'house.' There was indeed a small bed inside and a pile of books.

Yup. No windows. And the locks are all on the outside...

Subaru stood back up and coughed, trying to word this delicately. "*This* is where the other elves made you live?" He asked.

Emilia looked awkward. "Well, I don't know if I'd use the term 'made' necessarily..."

Oh, you mean you choose to live in this dingy little place with locks on the outside of the door by your own choice? Yeah, right.

"What about Mother Fortuna?" Subaru asked, struggling to keep the edge out of his voice. "Was she OK with you living here?"

"Oh, I spent most of my time at her house but I never slept there. I always slept here," Emilia explained.

You know, Fortuna, I really wish that you were here right now. I'd have so very many questions for you...

And a few other things that I'd like to say to you too...

"Why didn't you live with her?" Subaru asked, struggling to keep the growl out of his voice. "What would persuade the townspeople that you needed to sleep here?"

Emilia made a face. "I think... in retrospect, that they were trying to hide me. I'm not sure from who or what."

Hide you? That's interesting. Wait. That suggests that maybe the people who attacked the forest were specifically looking for you!

Yeah, better move this conversation along before that thought crosses your mind!

"So where did Mother Fortuna live?" Subaru asked quickly.

Emilia pointed up at one of the larger houses nestled in the trees above them.

Subaru looked up at it. "Looks nice. Maybe we should check it out. We will need a bigger house at some point."

Emilia made a face. "Yeah... maybe..."

Subaru saw that Emilia's face had become broody and quickly changed the subject. "Hey, what's that meadow over there?" He asked, pointing at a large snowy field.

"That's where we used to play games in the evening," Emilia said with a faint smile. "When everyone finished our work, we would come out there and play games or pick flowers. That meadow was always full of wildflowers in the summer." Emilia shook her head with a sigh. "It should be summer *now*."

"This place is still beautiful, Mili," Subaru assured her.

Emilia bowed her head sadly. "No, this is just an echo of the forest's beauty. You've never seen it in springtime."

"But someday I will!" Subaru assured her.

Emilia looked at him.

"That's why we've been doing all of this, right? To break the curse and bring life back to the forest."

"But, Subaru, the dragon blood is all-"

"I know, Mili. I know," Subaru interrupted. "But I am absolutely certain that there is still a way to break the curse."

"How?"

"I have no idea," Subaru admitted.

"Then how are you so sure that we can still break the curse?"

Subaru sighed. "Before we fought Capella, Roswaal told me that he didn't need me to sign the slave contract anymore. He said that I would learn something in the fight that would convince me to willingly work with him. During the fight, Capella told me that the blood was all gone. That means Roswaal must know another way to break the curse. I'd *never* make an alliance with him if he couldn't offer me something important."

Emilia's eyes widened. "Subaru! You can't trust Roswaal!"

"I never said that I *trusted* him but if he has information I need, I'd at least *consider* doing him a favor in exchange for him giving telling me how to lift the curse. Of course, the other option would be the Authority. I am absolutely certain that the Authority could break this curse once I know how to control it."

Emilia looked even more unsettled. "Subaru! I don't want you using your Authority anymore!"

Jeez, Mili! You're being awfully picky about this for someone who has yet to offer a constructive proposal herself!

"Well, whatever," Subaru shrugged. "The important thing is that somehow or other, we will break this curse. And you know what we're going to do then? Like that very same day?"

Emilia squinted at him. "What?"

"We are going to go on a date!" Subaru proclaimed.

Emilia blinked. "*What?!*"

"Yeah! Crazy, isn't it? I asked you out on a date the day after we met and two months later we have yet to manage to find any free time to do it! But that's the plan. As soon as you and I break the curse, we are going to pack ourselves a picnic lunch and we are going to go out and sit in that meadow surrounded by wildflowers and we're going to spend the entire afternoon just sitting there and enjoying each other's company. Hell, we might even lay down and take a nap! Can you imagine that? Us having enough free time to just lay back and take an afternoon nap? As soon as we break this curse that is exactly what we're going to do!"

Emilia laughed. "Subaru! That's so silly! We save the forest and you want to celebrate by having a picnic?"

"Hey! I should get a vote in what we do!" Subaru chuckled. "Well, I'm calling the day when we finally end the curse! That day we'll do what I want to do and what I want to do is have a picnic and a slow lazy day snuggling with my Emilia!"

Emilia shook her head with a smile. "How do you do it, Subaru?" She said, linking her arm with his.

"Do what?"

"We're in a desperate situation right now: alone, friendless, and in great danger but you can still say something that just makes me want to burst from happiness."

Subaru smiled at her. "The feeling's mutual. Anyway, what chores did you want to get done before we leave?"

Emilia's smile flickered. "Well, I wanted to make sure that the top of the *Crann-sine* wasn't damaged in any of the storms," She hedged. "And... I thought that I should go clean the snow off all the villagers," She whispered. "They must be absolutely buried by now..."

Subaru coughed. "Not so bad actually," He replied awkwardly. "I... cleaned them off after our big fight..."

Emilia's eyes widened. "You did?"

"Yeah... I... I'm sorry about what I said about the villagers, Emilia. I didn't... I didn't understand how you felt about the

people of the forest or how much it hurt you until I actually saw them. I found the statues and I tried to clean them off as best I could."

Emilia didn't reply right away. "Thank you, Subaru," She whispered, taking his hand.

"Wow. What's this?" Subaru asked looking up at what must have been one of the biggest trees in the forest. It was easily a two hundred feet tall and a broad ramp encircled the tree leading all the way to the upper branches.

Subaru and Emilia stood at the foot of the tree.

"This is the *Crann-sine*. It's 'the tree of the people,' or sometimes we called it the prayer tree. We used to gather here to pray."

"Neat," Subaru replied in a tone that indicated he didn't know why they were here.

Emilia smiled at him. "We're just going to go up to the platform at the top and make sure that it isn't damaged. We don't want any cracks or breaks in the ramps or the platform to get worse while I'm gone."

"Makes sense," Subaru replied. His face grew a mischievous smirk. "Hey, Mili. Race you to the top?"

Emilia rolled her eyes. "Subaru. What are you, a child? Why would we race to the top?"

"I'll give you a perfect reason why we should race to the top," Subaru said, pointing at a house behind them. "Look there and tell me what you see."

Emilia frowned and studied the house intently, looking for something special but nothing presented itself. "Um. Amarie's house? Subaru, what-"

Emilia turned around only to realize that Subaru was no longer standing beside her and was in fact already running up the ramp giggling.

Emilia's face twisted in outrage. "Subaru Natsuki! You dirty cheater!"

She lunged after him.

Subaru had gotten a large head start but Emilia not only caught up, she flew past him in a blur.

It took Subaru several minutes to reach the top of the tree. He was panting for breath when he reached the top platform.

The top platform was an enormous flat surface built into the upper canopy of the tree and it was the size of a baseball field. Several gazebo-like structures, with a wall covering one or more sides, dotted outer edge of the platform.

Emilia stood there waiting for him with her arms folded across her chest. "What kept you?" She asked in mock sympathy.

"You win!" Subaru said, gasping for breath. He put his arm around Emilia, leaning on her as he struggled to catch his breath. "How about a kiss for the gracious loser?"

"Nope!" Emilia turned her face away and put her nose up in the air. "Cheaters don't deserve kisses!"

"Oh, come on, Mili! That's a heavy penalty!" Subaru complained. "For how long?"

Emilia flashed him a mischievous grin. "Until I've decided that you've learned your lesson. Come on, Subaru. Let's take a quick look around."

"This place is beautiful!" Subaru said as they stood in one of the gazebos.

Emilia had shown him how the side wall of the gazebo could be slid around to block the wind and now they had a sheltered, cozy little hut to look over the forest that seemed to stretch out forever before them.

"We're lucky that it's so clear today!" Emilia said, looking at the snow covered trees fondly. "It's usually stormy in the forest."

"Yeah, no kidding. You can see forever up here!" Subaru said. The forest spread out before them and they couldn't see the end of it.

Emilia smirked at him. "I bet that you've never been up this high!" She boasted.

"Oh sure I have," Subaru replied calmly.

Emilia blinked.

Subaru glanced at her. "We're really good at building towers where I come from. Some of them can be thousands of feet high."

Emilia frowned at him. "Subaru. You said there wasn't any magic where you come from. Are you trying to trick me again?"

"No!" Subaru raised his hand as if he was under oath. "I swear! Those towers really exist and they're built without any magic at all."

Emilia glanced away with a pensive look on her face. "Subaru. Do you... ever miss your home?"

Subaru thought about it. "Not really. I mean... I miss my parents sometimes. I wish that there was a way to let them know that I'm OK and that I'm happy. And I'd love to have them meet you."

"Really?"

"Oh hell, yes!" Subaru said. "They would adore you!"

Emilia gave him a shy smile. "I know that Guese and Mother Fortuna would have liked you too."

Subaru smiled at her and stared out toward the horizon. "So I think that we're facing north?"

"Mmhm," Emilia agreed, pointing at a symbol drawn on the floor of the gazebo.

No clue what that symbol means. North, I guess?

"So the other day we were all the way up there?" Subaru asked, pointing at the trees far away.

"Actually, we were much further away than that," Emilia replied. "What you can see here is still the southern part of the forest. We arrived in the forest through the far northern western part."

"You told me once that you mapped the entire forest?"

"Yes. It kept Puck and me busy. It took us seven years."

Subaru gave a low whistle. "Wow. That's dedication."

"I almost never went to the northern part of the forest except for those times when I was making my map. The mabeasts up there are very aggressive. Especially the Snow Blight."

"Yeah, I remember," Subaru mumbled.

Emilia laughed.

Subaru smiled at her. "Well. Now that we're checked the platforms, I guess it's time to move on. I know this isn't quite as nice as a meadow filled with wildflowers but it's still a beautiful place to be."

"It is," Emilia agreed. "But now we need to go tend to the villagers."

"So any chance of a kiss before we depart this very romantic spot?" Subaru asked plaintively.

"You need to learn not to be a dirty cheater," Emilia replied primly.

"Haven't I been good since then?" Subaru whined.

"Not good enough," Emilia chuckled.

Subaru sighed in disappointment.

Emilia gently took his face between her hands. "This one's on credit," She teased.

Their lips met.

"Arche," Emilia murmured, brushing bits of snow off the frozen statue of a slender, stern-faced young man. "I owe you an apology. We met a girl named Anri a few days ago and we let her stay in your house because she had nowhere else to stay and my bed wasn't big enough for three. I'm sorry but I think you'd understand. You were always a very generous person and I know that you'd want to do whatever you could to get weary people out of the cold."

Subaru swallowed hard as he brushed a few flecks of snow off the statue of a pretty girl around Petra's age. Her face was frozen in an expression of absolute terror, her eyes were huge and thin streams of tears were frozen against her cheeks.

Emilia told me that this girl was named Amarie. I really wish that she hadn't said that.

I did not want Emilia to tell me all the elves' names. I did not want to start thinking of them as real people, people trapped by a terrible curse whose lives have been put on pause because of Emilia's mistake.

People whose lives have effectively come to an end unless I can find a way to help Emilia break the curse...

"Maiel," Emilia said, gently rubbing snow off a beautiful elven woman whose face was contorted in fear. "I'm glad to see that you're still doing well. I wanted you to know that I'm still working hard to try to find a cure it's just that... I've had a few setbacks..."

Emilia lowered her voice as she continued talking.

This is awful! I thought that this would be a simple chore and to some extent it is. There's barely any new snow on the statues since I cleaned them off the other day but Emilia is making a point to talk to every statue as if it were an old friend, which I suppose that it is...

Emilia is telling each of them about her adventures over the past few months. Sometimes, I hear her whispering and I can guess that she's talking about me. That's fine though. But to listen to her carry on these one sided conversations...

This is all so goddamn sad! And Emilia did this everyday when she lived in the forest! She's desperately trying to maintain her relationships with these STATUES. A relationship which currently does not exist. I'm not trying to be an asshole but all this talking to the statues is pointless. She might as well try to tell her kitchen table that everything is going to be alright for all the effect she's having.

I'm torn. I desperately want to be anywhere else and at the same time, nothing could make me move. I want to be here with Emilia. I want to offer her whatever comfort my presence affords.

Since he hadn't been talking to the statues, Subaru had been cleaning them off much faster than Emilia and he'd moved pretty far ahead of her.

Subaru took a deep breath. "So... Mili told me that your name was Amarie," Subaru muttered as he gently brushed the snow off the statue of the little girl's head.

Why am I doing this? Why am I acting like this statue is actually a little girl who needs comforting?

"She told me that you were a little sweet-heart who loved candy and dreamed of traveling," He said. "She said that you wanted to visit the capitol someday."

Subaru sighed. "You kind of remind me of Petra. That's another little girl that I know. She gave me this handkerchief, by the way. The one that I'm using to clean you off. You'll... meet her someday. Who knows? You two might be great friends!"

Subaru hesitated. "You don't... have to worry, you know. I promised Emilia that we'd break the curse and bring you all back. 'Promises are important and I must keep my promises' and all that," He muttered.

Subaru looked at the row of frightened statues. Amarie stood by her entire family. They had all been frozen together. "I know that we haven't gotten very far with finding a cure yet but... I want you all to know how hard Emilia has been working. Mili has been through hell and back trying to save you all. I mean, she never takes a break! I don't know how we're going to do it yet but I promise you that it's going to get done. Emilia won't give up until it's summertime in this forest again.

Why am I saying any of this? What's the point? I don't have an audience. No one is listening to me!

Subaru coughed. "You're probably all pretty bored from standing here for so long but just... hang in there a little longer. Emilia and I are getting back on our feet and once we wrap up restoring Emilia's memories, saving you guys is the next item on the list."

Subaru paused. "Huh. I wonder if I'm going to get a lot of crap from you guys once you're unfrozen. Maybe you're not OK with elves marrying humans. Actually, let's *not* think about that. I'm tired of borrowing trouble.

"The point is that, even though you've been stuck here for a long time, you can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. We're all going to come back here and there's going to be green grass in this forest. Emilia won't let you down. Trust me. She never lets anybody down when it really counts."

"Subaru," Emilia whispered.

Subaru started and spun around. He saw Emilia standing there with tears running down her face.

"Oh! Mili, I didn't hear you," Subaru said awkwardly. He coughed. "So are you done talking to the... villagers?"

Emilia nodded. She walked up to him and buried her face in his shoulder.

Subaru held her close. "We're going to heal them, Mili. It's just a matter of time. Nothing will stop us."

Emilia nodded. "I know, Subaru. As long as we're together, we can do anything."

Felt sat in the carriage with Beatrice and Puck, slowly traveling to the capitol. Reinhard had been summoned to the palace before Felt had even left the army camp and Garfiel and the twins had already returned to the capitol separately.

Army officers had been questioning the spirits for the past few days. The questions were repetitious and the spirits' answers were unchanging. Finally, Felt had put her foot down and demanded that the spirits be released into her custody and Reinhard had backed her up.

Crusch's officers felt they had no choice but to acquiesce. Subaru might be missing but he was still the heavy favorite for the throne. Moreover, after the selection started, Subaru had given Felt executive power over his faction in case he and Emilia were ever out of contact in an emergency.

Felt had demanded that the spirits be returned and the officers had been unwilling to argue.

"Are you guys OK?" Felt asked the spirits.

Neither one answered. They'd hardly spoken on this trip at all. Puck seemed morose and miserable, staring off into the distance with nothing to soothe his loneliness but Beatrice. Beatrice by comparison seemed to be in much better shape. Her eyes were hard as agates but her expression was thoughtful. She looked like someone wrestling with an unsolvable problem.

"Look, I'm really sorry, guys," Felt sighed, "I never wanted to put those damn magic-suppressing bracelets on you. I'm going to demand that the sages' council takes them off as soon as we reach the capitol. We should get there first thing tomorrow. But at least you'll be spending your time back in the Astrea manor with us. You'll be more comfortable and we'll be here to take care of you until Subaru gets back."

Puck whimpered.

Felt shook her head, "Puck, I swear! I *never* meant to take you away from Subaru! I was trying to save him from that witch!"

"Killing the witch would kill Subaru, I suppose," Beatrice said in a soft voice.

"Why do you keep saying that?" Felt asked.

Beatrice seemed to shake herself out of her reverie and gave Felt her full attention. There was no friendliness in her expression. "Perhaps Subaru is bewitched, perhaps our memories have changed, I suppose. Either way, Betty knows that her Subaru would not be willing to live in a world without the half-elf," Beatrice flatly.

Felt gaped at her. "Beako! That witch is dangerous! Who knows what the hell she's doing to Subaru now that she has him alone? She already almost killed Subaru *and* me! How do we break this enchantment on him?!"

Beatrice didn't answer right away. "If Subaru is bewitched then it was done using the power of an Authority, I suppose. It cannot be undone by normal magic," Beatrice said, petting the despondent Puck who sat on her lap.

Felt rubbed her forehead in frustration. "Alright then, how do we convince Subaru that he's been bewitched?" Felt asked. "Subaru won't be willing to die for this girl anymore if he realizes that she's just tricking him."

Beatrice sighed. "Witchcraft of this type is powerful but... never perfect, I suppose," Beatrice murmured, her attention still focused on Puck. "Warping memories of the past is complex. There are always paradoxes in our memories that can't be resolved."

"What kind of paradoxes?"

"If Subaru's memories have been modified, then the elf was inserted where she should not be, I suppose. This will create flaws in the memories. There is an old legend of a famous knight who was bewitched to think that an evil woman was his wife. The spell was broken when his son came to rescue him and the knight realized that the witch was not the boy's mother."

Felt frowned, mulling that over. "I don't get it."

Beatrice stared out the window with a pensive look on her face. She spoke as if she was talking to herself, "Because the son's mother was *not* the witch, simply replacing the mother with the witch in all of the knight's memories would lead to obvious inconsistencies. The wife and the witch would behave very differently in most situations, in fact. For example, the witch's powers would trivialize many problems that the knight remembered them facing together in his modified memories. But strangely, the knight could not recall the witch having *ever* made use of these powers in all the time that they had been married. This is because the wife that the witch had replaced in those memories had no magic to use.

"If the magic attempted to clean up *those* inconsistencies then this only creates still more memories to fix because the *outcomes* of these remembered situations would be different than what he recalled due to the witch doing things that the wife would not or could not. If the witchcraft tried to make the son be forgotten about entirely, then more and more memories would need to be removed and the man's mind would become fragmented. These are the paradoxes that Betty spoke of. If Subaru found such a paradox in his own memories then he would be convinced that he was bewitched, I suppose."

"OK," Felt sighed. "That at least gives us a plan, right? We take Reinhard, we find Subaru, and we have a parlay."

Beatrice gave Felt a dirty look. "We wouldn't *be* in this situation at all if the little thief and the red knight had done that in the first place and hadn't threatened to kill the witch, in fact!" Beatrice hissed.

"Hey! You can't blame me for that!" Felt protested, "I didn't know that Reinhard was going to have his kill-switch flipped by all this! Do you have any idea how hard it is to get Red willing to kill *anybody*? Heikel is still alive! Think about that!"

Beatrice didn't answer.

Felt closed her eyes with a sigh. "Beako, tell me the truth. Is there really any evidence that Subaru isn't the one being bewitched?"

Beatrice shrugged, "Betty is just... keeping an open mind, I suppose."

Felt buried her face in her hands with a moan. "Fuck me. Garf told me that I wasn't looking at things objectively. He warned me but I was too burned out and broken to see it. If I'd just asked Subaru to *talk* instead of being so determined to kill the witch..."

Beatrice didn't answer.

Felt shook her head. "Beako, when you guys were hiding in the cave, why didn't you and Subaru tell us that you were there? Why not try to talk to us?" Felt asked.

Beatrice looked at Felt incredulously, "The little thief is either an idiot or she thinks that Betty is. The entire Lagunican army was hunting down 'The Witch of Envy' with intent to kill her on sight, in fact. The only persons who could have suggested to the army that the half-elf resembled the Witch of Envy were you and the others. You put *all* of Betty's family in danger, in fact! Does the little thief really think the army would have considered Betty's Subaru an unacceptable sacrifice if it meant killing the witch?" Beatrice grated.

Felt's eyes widened.

Puck roused himself from his stupor to glower at Felt. "And Rem didn't help either, Felt!" Puck growled. "She said terrible things to my Subaru. I would have obliterated her on the spot if I'd had more magic at the time. She told Subaru that they were enemies now and that the next time they met, she and Subaru's former 'friends' would kill the witch and likely kill him."

Felt stared at Puck in shock. "What the fuck?!" She gasped.

"The little thief sounds surprised," Beatrice said dully.

"We never said that we'd attack Subaru! We were trying to help him! We wanted to stop the *witch*! And the soldiers were *not* supposed to know about the witch's appearance! The whole 'Witch of Envy' thing was supposed to be kept confidential. Only Crusch and her top trackers and officers were informed. Until Rem... *accidentally* let it slip to some of the troops..." Felt whispered in dawning understanding. Felt stared off into the distance open-mouthed for a long moment. Then she shook her head and continued, "And just for the record, Crusch was *not* supposed to send out people with a 'search and destroy' attitude. We wanted to *talk* to Subaru. We were trying to protect him from the witch!"

"Apparently your soldiers didn't get the memo, Felt," Puck growled.

"Just wait until I get my hands on Rem," Felt growled.

Beatrice sniffed. "Betty has no concern whatsoever for the little thief's welfare, I suppose, but the blue maid will crush the little thief effortlessly."

"I was going to let Garf do it," Felt grumbled. She scratched her head. "Beako, do you know how Subaru... feels about us right now?"

"Betty's Subaru was very angry," Beatrice replied. "He felt betrayed, I suppose. Nobody except for Betty and Bubby trusted him."

Felt flinched. "Beako, what was Subaru's plan when you guys split up? Maybe we can still find him and try to talk this out."

Beatrice shook her head, "Subaru's plan was to escape the country so that we would all have been safe. Then he wanted to write letters to the little thief and the red knight, in fact."

"Letters?"

"To convince them that Betty's Subaru was still Betty's Subaru. To try and work things out, I suppose," Beatrice sighed.

Felt held her forehead as if she was in pain. "OK, what else?"

Beatrice shook her head, "To find a way to fix everyone's memories, I suppose. But Betty's Subaru didn't have any ideas for how to do it."

"Great," Felt sighed. "And you really have no idea where that portal sent them? Just between us, I mean?"

Beatrice shook her head. She gazed out the window and her brow furrowed as she returned to deep thought.

Puck perked up. "Betty, I'm starting to wonder if maybe that girl really was a witch trying to trick us," Puck mumbled.

"Oh?" Beatrice asked in an incurious voice.

"You opened a portal when you were nowhere near the library. And the portal moved Subaru far enough away that we couldn't sense him anymore. I know how much mana that would take. There's no way that you had even close to enough mana to pull off a stunt like that, especially after your mana got drained in the Sanctuary. If the girl could give you all that magic then she must be far more powerful than she led us to believe," Puck said.

Betty's head snapped around to give Puck her undivided attention.

Felt frowned. "Wait, the witch gave you the ability to open the portal?" Felt asked.

Betty stared at Puck intently. "Betty did not take *any* magic from the half-elf," Beatrice emphasized. "Betty could not, in fact. Betty can only take large amounts of mana from persons she has a *strong bond* with."

Felt frowned. Beatrice's tone was that of someone trying to prompt their listener.

Felt realized that the spirits hadn't been left alone since they were captured and would have had no time to talk without numerous eavesdroppers.

Puck looked up at Beatrice, his dull expression slowly giving way to confusion. "Wait, then where did you get all that magic? You didn't draw it from Subaru. I would have felt it."

"Betty did not draw it from Betty's Subaru," Beatrice agreed.

Puck looked annoyed, "So who then? Not Subaru, not me, and not the witch, who else is there?"

Beatrice gave Puck a frustrated look.

Puck thought about it for a moment and then his eyes widened.

"What?" Felt asked in confusion.

That night after dinner, Anri returned to the other cottage while Subaru and Emilia tidied up.

When they finished cleaning up the kitchen, Emilia had doused the fire and they'd crawled into bed.

He gently wrapped his arms around her, trying not to touch the bandages. "Am I holding you too tight?" Subaru whispered.

Emilia shook her head and snuggled deeper into his warmth, a smile on her face. "No, it feels good," She murmured.

Subaru sighed in contentment.

"So tomorrow we bring Anri to meet Victoire," Emilia murmured. "It's going to be very hard to say goodbye to her. She's been a good friend.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Mili, there's something I think we should talk about," Subaru said slowly.

"What's that?"

Subaru made a face. "Well... The other night, Anri told me that she needs our help."

Emilia rolled over to face Subaru and nodded. "Of course. We do owe her our lives, Subaru."

"No argument, but listen to the whole story first. Apparently, House Griest is trying to finish off her homeland. They're sending a new army to crush them in a couple of days."

Emilia blanched. "Subaru, I want to help Anri too but... we can't fight off a whole army!"

"I agree," Subaru said. "I was about to tell her 'no' but I guess she realized that was what I was going to say because she made me an offer."

"What was that?"

"First of all, she offered us a home. She asked us if we'd come to Siros with her. She claimed that we wouldn't have to hide there and that we'd be safe."

Emilia squinted at him. "In Gusteko?" She asked dubiously.

Subaru shrugged. "Yeah, I don't know about that one either. Anri claims that Siros isn't like most of Gusteko and that people are most accepting there. Maybe it would work out for us, maybe it wouldn't. It's an idea. Anri also offered to help us get the spirits back."

"How?"

"She claims that she can use diplomatic pressure to make Lagunica release them," Subaru replied.

Emilia bowed her head. "Daddy..." She whispered. A few moment's later she looked up at Subaru. "If she's right then we could have Beatrice and Puck back without having to confront Reinhard."

Subaru nodded. "I know. I've had quite a few nightmares about bumping into Reinhard again. It's an appealing offer if it will work. I don't think Anri is lying but she might be overestimating her influence. The final thing she offered is she said that she'd give us access to the Grand Archives."

"She mentioned those when we were talking," Emilia recalled. "She said if we could find information about my curse anywhere, that would be the place."

Subaru nodded.

Emilia looked away, her face twisted in doubt and worry.

Subaru sighed. "Mili, I... I feel like this is the only chance we have left. If we don't go to the Archives to try to learn about your curse, then what will we try next? I feel like... we either try to go there or... we just give up," Subaru said quietly.

Emilia glanced away and bit her lip. A dozen emotions flickered over her face. She looked back at Subaru, her face conflicted. "What do you think?"

Subaru sighed. "I think that if we have any avenue left to pursue that might make everyone remember you, we need to take it. Restoring your memory would solve almost all of our problems right now."

"But can we really help Anri? Even if we wanted to, what could we do?"

Subaru shrugged. "I don't know. This army is a completely different kind of problem than we're used to. I'm not sure what we can do about that."

"But at the same time," Emilia said slowly. "We can't just abandon Anri. Not after everything that she's done for us."

"Yeah," Subaru sighed. "I feel the same way."

"And this might be our last chance to find out how to lift the curse on me," She whispered.

"Yeah, it might be."

Emilia bowed her head for a long moment. "Subaru, I know that this is going to be dangerous," She whispered. "And I know that I shouldn't be willing to risk seeing you get hurt for anything..."

Subaru waited. "But...?" He prodded.

Emilia's face tightened, tears flowing down her face. "I'd do *anything* to make Daddy remember me!"

***Chapter 20*: Chapter 20**

Felt and the spirits got back to the Astrea manor early the next morning. Beatrice, Puck in her arms, wordlessly followed Felt as she stormed into the house. Puck seemed indifferent to where he was or to where he was going. Beatrice's eyes were cold but her mind was clearly very much elsewhere.

Felt found Rem sitting on the bottom of the mezzanine stairs. Garfiel was leaning against a wall nearby.

"Hey, shrimp!" Garfiel called out in a friendly tone.

Felt ignored him.

Garfiel's smile faded as he noticed Felt's grim face.

"Rem," Felt said calmly although her eyes were as hard as stone. "Is there anything that you would like to share with me?"

Rem's gaze flickered to the spirits and then back to Felt. "Miss Felt, you sound upset."

"Very perceptive. I'd like to hear more about what you said to Subaru in the cave."

Rem looked up at Felt with a blank face. "I explained to him that he was making a mistake."

"*Did* you or did you *not* threaten to kill him?" Felt growled.

"*What?!*" Garfiel started.

Rem glanced away.

"I want an answer!" Felt demanded.

Rem stood up. "I simply told him the rightful consequences of associating with a witch-"

"Enough!" Felt said, shoving Rem back against the wall.

Rem stared at Felt in shock. Rem was taller than Felt by a head and Felt had no chance against Rem in a fight whatsoever but right now Felt's tiny body was trembling with rage and her red eyes were wild.

Felt's face was close enough to kiss Rem. "Rem, are you *with* us or *against* us?" Felt hissed.

"I'm on the side of all good-"

"Shut the fuck up, Rem," Felt spat, pointing an accusing finger in her face. "You have betrayed *all* of us and you did it deliberately. Is this something that the clown told you to do?!"

"I have heard nothing from Lord Roswaal since we left the Sanctuary."

Felt glowered at her. "I have cut you a *lot* of slack since we left the Sanctuary, Rem!" She grated. "I let it go when you didn't tell us about Subaru being in the cave! I ignored that you 'accidentally' told the soldiers about the witch! Have you even *wondered* what the consequences of telling everyone about the witch could be? If another 'Witch Hunt' is declared, all that blood is going to be on your hands!"

Rem's jaw dropped.

"Now I find out that you threatened to kill Subaru and you told him that we all wanted to do the same! Because of you, Subaru thinks that trying to get in touch with *any* of us is a suicidal idea!" Felt drew back, shaking her head in disgust. "No more, Rem! Do you understand me?! You are leaving this place just as soon as we can find a carriage and you can go back to the manor and wait for Roswaal or... go to hell for all I care! And if I ever even *suspect* that you have done anything to sabotage our chances of bringing Subaru home safely, I will spend every last gold coin he ever gave me to make sure that nobody *ever* finds your body!"

Felt turned on her heel and stormed out of the manor, bumping into Ram who had just walked in the door.

Ram opened her mouth to protest Felt's plowing into her, then closed it again when she saw the look on her face.

Felt slammed the door behind her.

Rem watched Felt leave with an expression of absolute shock on her face. She seemed badly shaken by the finality of Felt's pronouncement.

Rem looked at Garfiel. The young demi-human had his arms folded across his barrel chest. His normally boisterous demeanor was unusually solemn. He looked disappointed and turned his face away.

Rem's face grew conflicted and she sat back down on the stairs.

Garfiel sighed and bent down to the spirits, "Come on, Little Bit," He said to Beatrice. "We have some comfortable rooms for you for as long as you're here."

Beatrice made no response.

Garfiel gently lifted Beatrice onto his shoulder as she cuddled with Puck. "Don't worry, Little Bit," He whispered. "We're going to take good care of you until we can bring the Captain home again."

Beatrice whimpered.

"Garf, what has happened here?" Ram demanded.

Garfiel winced. He glanced at Rem who was staring down at the floor.

"OK," Garfiel sighed, "So, here's the thing..."

That morning, Anri returned to Emilia's cottage.

"Morning, Anri," Subaru said, putting on his shoes.

"Good morning," She replied. "Good to see I got here before you two could embark on another culinary disaster."

Subaru and Emilia shared a helpless glance.

"You are a very harsh critic, Anri," Emilia complained.

Anri started to make the last of the porridge and even started to slice up some fruits to put in it.

Subaru bit his lip. Then he and Emilia shared a long look. "Anri," He began, "Emilia and I have discussed your request."

Anri sat up straighter.

Subaru made a face. "We're willing to help you as much as we can. I know that we owe you. Honestly, I'd like to think that we'd try to help you even if we didn't owe you anything. I'm just not sure what I can do. My name is mud right now with at least two kingdoms. I don't really have any assets that could help you win a war."

Emilia nodded. "We're not entirely sure what we can do yet but if we can help you, we will."

Anri broke into a broad smile and bowed her head. "Thank you both so very much. I've watched you both accomplish great feats. With you at my side, I know that there's hope for victory."

Subaru looked at Emilia incredulously. She gave him an amused smile.

Subaru shook his head with a chuckle. "You know, for a Princess, you are a seriously bad judge of character."

Anri shrugged. "Well, obviously! Don't you ever read fairy tales? If the Princess doesn't fall for the evil witch's transparent lies, you don't have a story!"

Subaru laughed.

It didn't take Garfiel much exploring to find Rom's tavern. Felt had described it several times and the slum dwellers didn't seem to mind pointing it out to him as soon as Garfiel said that he knew Felt.

Garfiel entered the tavern and found Felt sitting near an enormous mountain of an old man who stood behind the bar.

Felt sat on a barstool with her forehead resting firmly against the bar. "Pour me another one, Gramps," She slurred.

"Felt, you just regained consciousness!" Rom objected.

"I know! That's the problem that I'm trying to fix!" Felt giggled. "Aren't you proud of me, Gramps? I finally developed that debilitating drinking habit that always entertained you so much!"

Garfiel walked into the tavern and Rom's sharp eye nearly pinned him to the ground. Rom casually reached for something under the bar. Garfiel knew that it must have been some kind of weapon.

"Hey, you must be 'Gramps,'" Garfiel said, walking up to the bar. "Felt's told me a lot about you."

Rom's clouded brow cleared. He started cleaning a glass. "Hey, you must be 'the fleabag.' I've heard a lot about you too," Rom replied.

Garfiel flashed him a grin.

Rom sighed, looking down sadly at his drunk granddaughter who was struggling to pour more liquor into her glass and spilling a great deal on the bar. "Want a drink?" He asked Garfiel.

Garfiel hopped onto a stool next to Felt, "Thanks, Gramps, but I'm actually here looking for an order of 'shrimp.' Besides, I have a drink," Garfiel said, picking up Felt's glass and downing it in one shot.

Garfiel cringed, "Damn, Gramps! What the hell is this? Lantern oil? Mabeast blood?"

"Hey!" Felt objected, impotently tugging on Garfiel's shirt, "That was my drink!"

"Shrimp, don't you think that you've had enough?" Garfiel asked kindly.

"Of course not," Felt burped. "If I thought that I'd had enough, I wouldn't have poured myself another drink!" Felt said logically. She made a grab for the bottle sitting on the bar and completely missed it.

Garfiel gently pushed the bottle just out of her reach.

Felt gave him a grumpy look, "Hey, what are you doing here anyway? I figured it would be Reinhard who came looking for me."

"Yeah, I spun him a story about you going shopping."

"He bought that?" Felt said, sounding embarrassed.

"Yup. You know, Reinhard might be the one person in the world that I'm capable of tricking," Garfiel mused.

"I feel," Felt belched, "So sorry for the *both* of you."

Garfield sighed. "Look, shrimp. This mess isn't your fault."

"Ugh," Felt groaned, putting her face down on the bar and covering her head with her hands. "This mess is *entirely* my fault, Garf! If I had just listened to you and realized that I was too worked up to handle the situation, Subaru would be home by now! I would have realized how serious it was when Rem opened her mouth to all those soldiers about the Witch and I would have made Red promise to behave himself when we found Subaru! I should never have told Crusch about the Witch at all! I should have just said: 'Subaru is lost in the woods and the Cult is after him. Please help us find him.'"

"I always thought that I was clever but I can't *believe* how much I fucked up just as soon as Subaru wasn't around to hold my hand! If a Witch Hunt starts it will be just as much my fault as it is Rem's!"

"What is a 'Witch Hunt,' anyway?" Garfiel asked.

Felt muttered something indistinct.

Rom picked up the bottle and put it away under the bar. "A Witch Hunt happens once every few generations or so. The last one happened when I was a boy. It starts with reports of sightings of silver haired half-elves: people who look like they could be the Witch of Envy. Rumors start flying, lurid stories about witchcraft and magic rituals performed in human blood. Then the mobs start to form and they go after these supposed witches and any other easy targets. They're usually just minorities or people the community doesn't like. By the time the dust settles, the corpses are stacked up like cord wood. It's a mass slaughter across the entire continent."

Garfiel swallowed hard.

"Yeah, what he said," Felt agreed, trying to lick the last few drops of alcohol out of her glass.

Garfiel sighed, "OK. Enough, shrimp. We've spent the past few days feeling sorry for ourselves. The Captain needs us."

Garfiel effortlessly scooped up Felt and slung her over his shoulder.

"Hey, fleabag!" Felt complained, slapping his back ineffectually. "Get your hands off my ass! You're not even my type anyway."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You like redheads," Garfiel muttered.

"What was that?!"

"Time to get back to work, shrimp," Garfiel declared. "We are *going* to find the Captain and bring him home."

"Right," Rom said, coming out from behind the bar. "Let's get busy."

"You coming, Gramps?" Garfiel said in surprise.

"I never abandon a drinking buddy," Rom replied. "Simple rule, never broke it."

"Your wound is healing nicely, Mili," Anri said, after removing her bandages. "And I see absolutely *no* reason why we need to bandage it again," Anri added in a pointed aside to Subaru.

Subaru sighed and nodded.

"Thank you, Anri," Emilia said warmly.

"I know that it's early for lunch but let's have a quick meal before we head out," Subaru suggested. "We don't know what kind of food Victoire will have on hand."

"Subaru, we should also bring some food with us, just in case," Emilia added. "Victoire might be roughing it if she couldn't risk going to market."

"That's a good idea too," Subaru said.

"Emilia, let's you and me make a quick soup," Anri said. "It'll go a lot faster if we keep Subaru out of it."

Subaru gave her a chill look. "Gee, thanks."

"Don't mention it," Anri said calmly.

Subaru sat at the table as the girls started making soup. Out of boredom, he picked up Anri's rapier that she had left lying against a chair and examined it.

I don't know much about swords but this certainly looks like good workmanship. It even looks like there are some fine engraving on the blade.

Subaru noticed something in the cross guard that intrigued him. It looked like two tiny containers on opposite sides of the hilt's cross guard that could be unscrewed and opened.

Subaru did unscrew one but found it was empty.

"Anri," He called. "What are these little chambers for?"

"Hm?" Anri asked looking at him. "Oh. Those are reliquaries."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a place where you can store... good luck charms, I guess? There's a long history in Gusteko of powerful warriors and rulers carrying little good luck charms in their weapons and armor. Like the bone shards of a saint or an important ancestor."

Subaru barely refrained from gagging.

As he inspected the sword more closely, he suddenly had an idea.

He looked over at the counter and grabbed a pair of tiny pyroxene crystals a little smaller than marbles that sat there.

"Hey, Emilia," Subaru said, walking up to her, "Do you think you could charge those crystals with lightning magic for me?" Subaru handed them to her.

Emilia picked them up with a frown. "Good idea, I'm not sure I want you trying to charge any more stones."

Subaru made a face. "Jeez, Emilia. You are a very strict instructor, you know that? Tell you what, how about you show me the *right* way to do it and I'll copy you?"

Anri continued to peel vegetables for lunch while Emilia held a crystal in each hand and closed her eyes. "Subaru, what do you need magic crystals for anyway?"

"I have an idea involving Anri's sword."

"Please don't break that," Anri muttered with a worried expression. "It belonged to my mother, you know."

Subaru sighed. "I'm not going to do anything to it."

"Subaru," Emilia asked, frowning. "What are you going to do with the sword? Do you even know how to use one?"

"Sure. The pointy end goes in the other guy."

"Subaru," Emilia moaned.

Subaru sighed. "No, Emilia. I don't know how to use a sword. I always meant to ask Reinhard for lessons but I guess we were too busy and then all hell broke loose. But I do have an idea for an experiment. It's kind of like when we were making the engine."

"The what?" Anri asked.

Subaru chuckled. "Long story."

Emilia put the charged stones down on the table. "Your engine," Emilia said smiling fondly as she resumed peeling vegetables. "It seems like so long ago that we were building that."

"I know," Subaru muttered. He took the stones and walked back over to the table.

Subaru shook his head and sat down, studying the rapier

This is kind of a wild idea but if I play it right, I think that I could turn this sword into a formidable weapon. I noticed that the rapier has a wooden handle over its tang. That makes the sword easier and more comfortable to grip. Wood is also a good electrical insulator. So if I connect these two crystals to the sword, I bet I can get a current flowing through the blade. The sword won't be a lightsaber but when someone makes beat or parries the sword, they should get a shock.

I doubt that the shock would do anything more make them jump but remember, this is a world of magic and witches. It's not a huge leap to assume that maybe the sword that you're fighting against is cursed. 'Anyone who would try to put iron to the monster Subaru must themselves be sterner than steel, lest the shock of the blow itself put deep wounds into their soul.'

OK, so maybe I'm overselling this but the point is, if the person I'm dueling is afraid of me, if they're afraid to parry my sword because they don't understand what it's doing to them, then that's one hell of an advantage. Even if they're wearing a full suit of armor and have no reason to be concerned about a rapier at all, the shock will make them think that I'm attacking their soul.

If my enemy panics then I don't need to be a great swordsman. I can persuade him to run even if I'm incompetent with a blade.

Subaru carefully worked the two crystals into the reliquaries of the cross guard.

Lucky these crystals are small enough to fit.

He gingerly touched the wooden handle and felt nothing.

Then he carefully stretched his finger out to the flat of the rapier.

There was a bright spark. "Ouch!" Subaru shouted, putting his finger in his mouth.

It's like touching a hot stove. No real damage but it's one hell of a surprise. In a tight spot that could be all that Anri needs.

"Subaru," Anri asked, looking at him in confusion. "What did you do?"

Subaru smirked. "Try touching the blade."

Anri looked unsettled as if thinking that she was being set up for a prank but she walked over to Subaru and gently touched the flat of the blade.

There was a brilliant spark and Anri jumped back with a curse. "Subaru! What did you do?!"

Emilia sighed. "Oh. He's just being clever again," She murmured in resignation.

Subaru chuckled. "Can you try to not make it sound like a bad thing, Mili? Here, take it by the hilt this time," He turned the sword around so that Anri could grab it by the hilt.

She hesitated but she gingerly reached out and grabbed the hilt. She frowned in puzzlement. "The sword... feels fine now," Anri murmured.

"The charge is running through the blade, not the hilt," Subaru explained. "You can hold it like that safely but anyone you fight is going to be in for quite the surprise."

Anri slowly touched the blade against the wooden table.

Nothing happened.

She looked at Subaru in confusion.

He smirked. "Try touching the blade to the door knob," He said.

Anri nodded and did as she was told.

As soon as the blade touched the metal doorknob there was a brilliant spark and Anri jumped back almost dropping the

rapier.

"What did you do, Subaru?" Anri asked in awe. "Did you enchant my sword with lightning?"

Subaru scratched his chin. "Actually, that's not such a bad way to look at it."

"How did you do this?" Anri asked.

"Check the reliquaries," Subaru replied.

Anri unscrewed the compartments and pulled the stones out. She looked up at Subaru with a baffled expression. "I don't understand," She admitted.

Subaru chuckled. "Well, you really don't need to understand *why* it works. Honestly, I'm still trying to figure out why we can touch those stones with electrocuting ourselves at all."

"Maybe the stones sense how you want to use them, Subaru," Emilia suggested, still chopping vegetables.

Subaru frowned. "Um... well, I guess I don't have a *better* theory," He admitted. "But anyway, the important thing is that if you put those stones in your sword before a big fight, you'll have one heck of an edge. Just tell them that your sword is enchanted or cursed or something. You can probably convince someone in a full suit of armor to cut and run if you shock him enough times."

Anri's face was like a child with a new toy. "Thank you for the lovely gift," She said warmly.

"No problem," Subaru replied. "But I wouldn't put those crystals in the sword until you need them. The magic in them isn't permanent and you don't want to drain it before you need it."

Anri nodded, "Right."

Felt, Garfiel, and Rom returned to the Astrea manor to find Rem once again sitting on the lowest step of the mezzanine with Reinhard scowling down at her. Rem stared down at her feet. Ram stood nearby looking impassive and Beatrice sat in a chair with Puck on her lap, both looking disinterested and miserable.

Felt still dangled over Garfiel's shoulder.

Garfiel walked over to the mezzanine. "Hey, Red. I guess they've already brought you up to speed," Garfiel said, noting his angry expression.

Felt snorted. "Redheads! Now I get it!" She laughed drunkenly.

"Miss Felt!" Reinhard hurried over to Garfiel and then stepped behind him so that he could look at Felt's face in concern. "What has happened to you?"

"I'm drunk, silly!" Felt chuckled. "Oh, Red. You look so cute when you're acting all concerned about me!"

Reinhard cocked his head in confusion.

"Red," Felt said plaintively, clearly trying to sound like a sick, helpless child. "My tummy is feeling very upset right now. You want to kiss me and make me feel all better?" Felt asked, flinging her arms around his neck.

Reinhard turned as red as his hair.

"Oh boy," Garfiel sighed, looking over his shoulder at the grinning Felt and the stupefied Reinhard. "OK, you guys need to stop talking behind my back," Garfiel grumbled, setting Felt down on the floor where she leaned back against the wall.

Felt grabbed her stomach. "Oh Gods, I feel so sick," She moaned. "I think I'm going to throw up..."

"Well, not in here you're not!" Heikel shouted, walking into the hallway with a grim Fein right behind him. "Reinhard, I don't want these freaks-"

Heikel stopped talking as a room full of people, several of whom were easily capable of killing him, shot murderous looks in his direction.

Heikel quickly stepped out of the hallway and departed.

Garfiel sighed, "OK, now that *that* annoyance has been dealt with, we need to come up with a plan to find the Captain."

"Unfortunately, I fear that is going to have to wait, Master Garfiel" Reinhard said. "We have both been summoned to the royal palace to give testimony about Lord Subaru."

"*What?!*" Felt startled out of her drunkenness.

"The sages' council has been convened and Lady Crusch has already addressed them," Reinhard said in a worried voice. "I have great concerns about what is happening."

"Fuck!" Felt said, staggering to her feet and nearly falling over. "Well, this is great timing! Come on, I need to go and

make myself 'pretty.'"

Rem stood up. "I will assist-"

"Rem, if you so much as lay a finger on me, I will rip out a yard of your guts!" Felt snapped.

Rem flinched, looking truly hurt by Felt's words.

"I will assist you then," Ram said in an impassive tone.

"Fine," Felt muttered as she struggled to walk up the stairs.

Early that afternoon, Subaru, Emilia, and Anri were riding Patrasche across the northern plains toward the Gusteko border.

"Subaru," Anri shouted, "Should we go back and get the wagon now?"

Patarsche gave a squawk of protest.

"Well, that's one vote for 'no,'" Subaru yelled back. "Let's sync up with Victoire first before we start worrying about supplies. Besides, maybe we can buy a wagon dragon in Stoneybrooke. Does it have a market?"

Anri shook her head. "Well I've never been there before but, from what I've heard, not really. We tend to locate our safe-houses in isolated ares where they won't attract much attention. But if Victoire went looking for a dragon she might have been able to... find one."

'Find' presumably being a euphemism for 'steal' in this case...

"OK, well that's promising," Subaru replied.

"Grandfather told me that the safe-house is right up here past that grove," Anri called.

"Did your grandfather tell you where all the safe-houses were?" Emilia asked.

"Of course! It was part of my education. You never know when that information will come in handy. Although, I don't think he was planning on it being of use quite so soon," Anri sighed.

Subaru saw a house not far way and made for it.

"Princess!" A shrill voice called.

Subaru reined in Patrasche and looked off into the woods.

Victoire walked out of the bushes with a somber look on her face. Her fancy clothes were dirty.

"Victoire, what are you doing out here?" Anri asked in confusion.

Victoire looked awkward. "Yeah, I'm sorry about this, Princess. I know that waiting out here in the bushes is a lot less secretive than hiding in the house but... I just couldn't fucking wait in there..."

"What do you mean?" Anri asked.

Victoire sighed and looked up at Anri sympathetically. "The short answer is that this house needs to be added to the list of the ones that we can't use anymore. What's worse is that it looks like those Griest fuckers... caught up with Gabby, Vera, and Wolfgang before I got here..."

"*Vera?*!" Anri gasped in horror. The girl slipped off the dragon and dashed toward the house but Victoire caught her in a tight grip as she ran past.

"Let me go! Let go of me!" Anri demanded.

"Hey! Princess!" Victoire shouted. "Take my word for this: You do *not* fucking want to see what's in that house! Look, you just... Princess, don't let what happened in there be your last memory of them..."

Anri's face twisted in horror and she went limp, laying back against Victoire's breast with tears streaming down her face.

"What happened here?" Subaru asked.

Victoire looked up at him and her expression darkened.

Subaru glared back, remembering her hording the medicine that Emilia needed.

Finally Victoire sighed. "I can't say for sure how it happened but Griest has located two of our safe-houses in rapid succession. I don't buy that this is just a big fucking coincidence. My best guess is that the Shadows have been compromised."

"You think you have a traitor?" Subaru asked.

Victoire thought for a moment and then shook her head. "No fucking way."

Anri sighed. "Victoire, I know that Shadows say that they would die before-"

"Let me stop you right there, Princess," Victoire cut her off. "I haven't succumbed to fucking sentimentalism here. I'm saying it's not a traitor because *that* wouldn't make sense."

"What do you mean?" Anri asked.

Victoire shrugged. "Compartmentalism is a big thing with spies. None of the Shadows know where all of the safe-houses are. We're not even supposed to discuss it with one another. That means if one of us goes rogue, they can't take down the whole system. To knock over all the safe-houses that have been compromised so far, Griest would have had to subvert an awful lot of us. Either that or your Grandpa switched sides," She said sarcastically, "I don't buy it." Victoire looked up at Emilia with a dark expression. "Hey, Princess, I just have to ask. How many demi-humans have you been sharing safe-house locations with?"

Anri sighed. "Victoire," She said in exasperation, "Subaru and Emilia only know about two safe-houses at this point and they never had a chance to tell anyone about them anyway!"

Victoire's mouth thinned but she didn't protest.

Anri looked at the house. "Vera," She whimpered. Anri gently shook her way out of Victoire's embrace and walked away, her face buried in her hands.

"Princess," Victoire called after her. "Look, I hate to be a pill, I really do, but we're rapidly running out of any fucking places to hide. Unless we plan to camp out under a damp rock someplace, I think that we had better make a rush back to Siros."

"Siros is under siege!" Subaru objected.

"No, it isn't, you dip-shit!" Victoire said mockingly. "The *province* is under attack but the city isn't surrounded! Even if it was, there are secret ways in."

Subaru scoffed. "You don't know that any of those ways are *still* secret! Even if you can get in, you're going into a box! A box that's very likely to be broken open any time now!"

Anri sighed and shook her head. "I guess... if this is to end in flames... then my pyre should be in Siros with my people."

"Yeah, well that's a happy thought! Let's not go there just yet," Subaru grumbled. He thought for a moment. "How far away is Siros?"

"A little more than a day by dragon," Anri said in a dead voice. The somber princess walked off a short distance and squatted down on the ground where she started rummaging through her bag.

Subaru scratched his chin. "Alright. Let's get back over the border for a while."

"Why?" Victoire asked suspiciously. "We should be going back to Siros before things get fucking worse!"

"Do you have supplies for the trip, Victoire?" Subaru asked bluntly. "Emilia and I didn't pack enough food to last four people for several days. I doubt we can travel in a straight shot through a province at war. So, if we're dodging patrols and assassins, let's assume that it takes us four days to get there, just to be safe. Do you have a tent or sleeping rolls?"

Victoire scowled up at him.

"Subaru," Anri said excitedly, jumping up and closing her bag. "You're right! We need to go to Ganaks."

"Ganaks?!" Subaru asked in surprise. "Why Ganaks?"

"Because there's a communication network there. For a few gold coins, you can send a message instantly to all the major cities on the continent. Including Siros!"

"What do you want to tell them?" Subaru asked.

"For one thing, that I'm still alive!" Anri said pointedly. "For another, I want to tell them to hang in there because we're coming to help them!"

Subaru and Emilia stared at each other incredulously. Anri said this as if they were an army coming to relieve the soldiers.

Subaru scratched his chin. "OK. I guess that makes *some* sense," Subaru admitted. "And we can do our shopping there too. I really think we need to replace some of the stuff we lost when we were separated from... the spirits..." Subaru said to Emilia in a somber tone.

Emilia bowed her head sadly.

"Princess," Victoire said sharply. "I've really got to object here. No matter how Sanshi knows about our safe-houses and the Shadow network, your safety is in the trash right now! The Shadows know how you fucking think better than you do-"

"Which is exactly why," Subaru interrupted. "We're going to go off script. We're not *going* to another safe-house, we're going to be camping out in the woods. Once we have supplies we won't need to visit any safe-houses on our way back to Siros. We'll just make a beeline for it. If the Shadows are compromised then they'll be out of their element since they'll be searching for us out in the woods and we won't be following a route that they expect."

"It's a good idea, Victoire," Anri supported Subaru.

Victoire frowned. "Kid," She told Subaru in a neutral tone. "You are seriously underestimating a Shadow's resourcefulness if they really are playing both sides. But I got to admit I don't have any fucking better ideas. I don't have enough food to last us the whole trip if we need to hide out in the woods or take the long way around."

"Hey, Victoire, did you manage to locate a dragon?" Anri asked.

"A dragon?" Victoire asked in surprise. She frowned. "Um. Was I... supposed to do that?"

"No but we have a wagon full of supplies that we should try to bring back to Siros," Anri explained. "We can't afford to waste anything right now. Besides, Patrasche can't carry all four of us."

Victoire scratched her chin. "OK... so I guess we need to find an earth dragon," She said dubiously. Then she shrugged. "Well, I'm sure I can persuade some smelly dirt farmer to part with one."

'*Persuade*' has so many subtle meanings, Subaru rolled his eyes.

"Great!" Anri said. "Why don't you do that and grab the wagon while we go to Ganaks?"

"Excuse me!" Victoire said incredulously.

"We should multitask, Victoire," Anri said calmly. "We don't have a lot of time to squander!"

Victoire glowered at Anri. "Princess," She grumbled. "Could I have a quick word with you? In private?"

Anri sighed but nodded and the pair walked off a good distance.

Subaru and Emilia slid off Patrasche and stretched their stiff muscles after the long ride.

Subaru looked at the pair who were standing some ways away. Anri had her unbroken arm folded across her chest and her expression was sullen. Victoire looked frustrated and was waving her arms animatedly but Subaru couldn't hear what she was saying.

"I get the impression that she's not saying anything nice about us," Subaru mumbled.

"She's not," Emilia agreed.

Subaru glanced at Emilia and a grin spread across his face. "Oh right. What are they saying?"

"Subaru," Emilia chided. "It's rude to eavesdrop on other people's conversations."

"Yeah, you're right," Subaru said serenely. "So... you're *not* listening to them?"

Emilia giggled. "Well... I didn't say that."

Subaru chuckled. "Come on, what are they saying?"

Emilia listened. "Victoire is furiously trying to convince Anri to let her come with us."

"Which is dumb. There isn't room on Patrasche for anyone else even if we *wanted* to take her," Subaru object.

"Anri is reminding Victoire that you still want to kill her because of... what she did," Emilia continued in a shocked voice. She glanced at him in confusion.

Subaru made a face. "Remember? She drank all the medicine? She didn't even *need* it all! Anri told me that her wound was small!"

"She probably wasn't thinking very clearly while trying to deal with a wound that wouldn't close," Emilia excused her.

Subaru grunted. "Trust me, I know what that's like. It was still a shitty thing to do."

Emilia listened for a time and her face grew affronted. "Victoire is assuring Anri that she can handle you. She says that you're a... well, I'm not going to repeat the words she's using..."

"I can imagine," Subaru chuckled.

"...She says that you're nothing but a skinny, pathetic example of a man with a deluded opinion of how powerful you are!" Emilia said in a tone of great offense.

Subaru snorted. "That's news to me! I always thought that it was the rest of the world that had the deluded opinion of how powerful I was!"

Emilia listened and then shook her head. "She's trying to convince Anri that she should get away from us. That we're politically dangerous. That nobody in Siros would approve of her associating with a foreigner and... a demi-human."

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Mili, is Victoire an absolute idiot?! Why is she talking like this to Anri when she knows that this is just going to enrage her boss?"

Emilia shook her head, glaring at Victoire.

Subaru heard muffled shouting. He glanced over at them and saw Anri pointing her finger in Victoire's face, looking truly livid.

"Hm," Subaru said, sounding amused. "I guess Anri wasn't happy to hear that."

"No, she was not," Emilia agreed. "She's ordering Victoire to locate a dragon for the wagon and to bring the wagon to an inn... someplace. I can't really follow what she's describing. She says that we'll all meet there."

"I wonder if some more time alone will improve Victoire's attitude," Subaru muttered.

Anri and Victoire walked back over to the others. Anri's expression was furious and Victoire's was sullen.

"Alright," Anri said in a business-like voice. "Victoire is going to locate a dragon and fetch the wagon for us. Then we'll meet at the crossroads between Sanshi and Siros."

"It's not a safe house, is it?" Subaru asked.

Anri shook her head. "It's just a little inn that I've passed by a few times. It's a pretty shabby place. Not somewhere anyone would look for a princess."

Subaru nodded. "OK, sounds like a plan," He said as he and Emilia remounted Patrasche.

"We'll see you there tonight, Victoire," Anri said, her stern tone softened by guilt.

Victoire didn't look pleased by this plan but she bowed her head. "Whatever you say, Princess."

Anri returned to Patrasche and Subaru helped her climb up in front of him.

"Hey, dickweed!" Victoire called.

"Yeah?" Subaru didn't bother to ask if she meant him. Emilia scowled at her but Anri seemed to have no appetite for more conflict with Victoire.

"I just want you to know," Victoire said calmly but her eyes burned. "That if any harm should befall the Princess while she is in your care, I will make you *very* fucking sorry that you were ever born!"

Subaru gave her an annoyed look. "Acceptable terms," He said in a chill voice. "Incidentally, do you have contacts in Ganaks?"

"Contacts?" Victoire asked.

"Yeah. Like another Shadow that we could reach out to so that we could try to get some information while we're there."

Victoire thought for a moment. "Yeah. I think that Mikael is still working as a bus boy at Miss Lilian's restaurant."

"Is there a password?" Subaru asked.

"Password?" Victoire asked vaguely.

"How will he recognize that I'm on his side?" Subaru asked incredulously. "He's not going to blow his cover and talk to me just because I ask!"

"It's OK, Victoire," Anri murmured. "We can trust him."

Victoire flared her nostrils. "'Famished,'" Victoire said, "It's an easy word to work into the conversation in a restaurant," She said, walking away.

"Yeah, I guess it is," Subaru mutter, turning Patrasche and dashing away south.

Felt adjusted the same yellow dress and coronet that she had worn at the royal selection announcement. Rom had returned to the bar since he had not been summoned to the palace and he wouldn't be able to get in.

Reinhard sat nearby on one of the two beds in the room.

Felt glared at herself in the mirror, looking herself over with a critical eye. "How do I look, Red?"

"Exquisite, Miss Felt. I rarely see you dress up in this manner for social occasions," Reinhard replied.

"This isn't a social occasion, Red," She said as Ram began applying her makeup. "I'm going into battle right now and I need to be suitably equipped."

Reinhard stared at her, "Miss Felt, is this another joke that I'm missing?"

"No, she's just facing down foes that we couldn't handle, Red," Garfiel muttered, walking into the bedroom and sitting

down next to Reinhard.

"Did the royal council tell you what this was all about?" Felt asked, trying not to move her mouth.

Reinhard shoot his head. "They told me nothing. Just that we have been summoned to give testimony."

"That can't mean anything good," Garfiel grumbled.

"Probably not," Felt said. "We better all be on our toes here. This is going to be a long day."

Rem entered the room. "Your carriage has arrived, Miss Felt," She said in a small voice.

Felt glared at her.

"You are finished, Miss Felt," Ram said stepping away.

"Super," Felt sighed. "Alright, let's go," She said, putting her arm through Reinhard's as they left the room and headed toward the mezzanine.

"Reinhard!" A taunting voice called out from behind them.

"And the day keeps right on giving..." Felt muttered as the group turned around to see Heikel walking toward them with a sardonic look on his face.

"Father," Reinhard said in a distant voice.

"Reinhard, we really need to talk. I have no issues with you keeping a mistress. At least you're finally starting to act like a real man," Heikel said with a mean smirk, "But keeping her in the house? That's really poor form. Also, can you pick someone less scrawny next time? If we really have to present mistresses publicly, let's at least try to make sure that they're moderately attractive."

Reinhard looked enraged and he started to walk toward his father but something pulled him back. He looked down to see that Felt had an iron grip on his wrist.

Felt didn't even bother to look at Heikel, "Come along, Red. We have important things to take care of. 'Important things' do not involve Heikel."

Reinhard gave his father another glare but he obediently followed Felt down the mezzanine stairs as did Ram.

Garfiel and Rem watched them go.

"So," Garfiel said nonchalantly, walking over to Heikel, "What was all that about?"

Heikel gave him a look of disgust, "Don't talk to me, freak. My son may tolerate demi-humans but I don't."

"Funny, I was under the impression that you were the one being tolerated around here," Garfiel replied.

Heikel scowled at him, "Be very careful, freak. In a gentleman's company, words like those would be considered a cause to fight."

"Heikel, I seriously doubt that you would know anything about being a gentlemen," Garfiel replied with a smirk.

Heikel bared his teeth. "I have had all I will take from you freaks under my own roof," Heikel shouted, drawing his sword and swinging it at Garfiel's neck.

Garfiel caught the blade in his hand guard. A thin stream of blood flowed steadily out of Garfiel's palm but Garfiel just kept smiling with all his sharp teeth.

"See, this is why I can't respect knights, bozo. They all rely on their equipment. But once you take that away from them," Garfiel punched Heikel in the chest, ripping the sword out of his hands. Garfiel's blow sent him flying head over heels and skidding to a halt on the floor.

"They got nothing," Garfiel laughed, tossing the bloody sword on the ground and sauntering over to Heikel's prone body.

Heikel leapt to his feet and tried to run away but Garfiel grabbed him by the throat with one hand and slammed Heikel against the nearby wall, lifting him high over his head without any evident strain.

Heikel desperately tried to break Garfiel's hold but the demi-human's grip was like iron.

"Heikel," Garfiel said with a savage grin, "For the past few days, I've watched you treat Reinhard like shit. I've watched you call the shrimp every name that your tiny, little brain can think of for 'whore.' Let's just say, my magnificent self has had more than enough of all your bull. If you keep pushing Red and Felt then I promise you, something really, really bad is going to happen to you."

"Help me!" Heikel wheezed in a barely audible voice to a maid dusting furniture below the mezzanine. The maid jumped slightly then pretended she hadn't heard anything. She quickly finished her dusting and then hurried away.

Garfiel snickered. "See that's the funny thing about treating people like shit, Heikel. I've watched you abuse the people

who serve your family since I got here. But if you treat people like shit then nobody is going to have your back when you really need them to. I bet I could arrange an 'accident' for you right here and nobody would ask any questions," Garfiel growled.

"That's enough, Garf," Rem said in an impassive tone, "This is neither the time nor the place."

"What?!" Garfiel demanded. "Are you going to take his sid-" Garfiel noticed that Rem had taken her mace out.

"Lord Heikel," Rem continued in the same distant tone, "I have immense respect for your son and Miss Felt. If young Garf and I took you out somewhere and conveyed to you the full measure of our disapproval for your rank behavior, your son would be very upset. His anguish would also upset Miss Felt who has gone through tremendous personal loss and hardship recently. It would not be incorrect to imagine that your life hangs entirely on our conviction that your death would upset Sir Reinhard and Miss Felt more than your continued crass bullying does. I would strongly urge you to do everything in your power not to change our calculations for the worse."

Heikel eyes bugged out as he looked at Rem.

Rem stared at him, unblinking. "Put him down, Garf. As I said, this is neither the time nor the place," She repeated.

Garfiel flashed the blue-haired maid a grin and dropped Heikel who fell to the floor.

Heikel scrambled back away from them then got to his feet and ran through the manor. He didn't even bother to pick up the bloody sword that he had dropped.

"Nicely done, Rem. You always did have style," Garfiel chuckled.

"You need to learn subtlety when you are threatening to kill someone, Garf," Rem said flatly, taking his bleeding hand in her own, "If that maid had decided to go and sound the alarm rather than pretend that nothing was happening, we would both be fighting for our lives right now."

"Come on. We could have taken a bunch of maids and manservants," Garfiel muttered as Rem began to use magic to heal his wound. "Hell, I could have taken 'em all myself. That way you wouldn't even need to get your hands dirty!"

"Could you have 'taken' the entire city?" Rem asked pointedly. "Such combat easily spirals out of control, Garf. You are not in the Sanctuary anymore. You could easily be forced to fight a hundred trained soldiers. You need to think carefully before acting."

Rem finished healing his wound. Garfiel frowned and grumbled something under his breath but he seemed to be taking Rem's comment seriously.

Garfiel made a face. "So what if the prick keeps causing trouble, what then?" Garfiel asked her.

"We will choose a *quiet* place and time and resolve the matter discretely," Rem said calmly.

Garfiel grinned at her but his smile quickly faded away, "You *really* fucked up when you turned on the Captain. You get that, don't you, Rem?" He asked.

Rem glared at him. "You and Felt keep saying that I betrayed Subaru. No one has even brought up how he betrayed us!"

"And *how* was that again?" Garfiel asked skeptically.

"Do not be foolish, Garf," Rem grumbled. "You saw him leave us behind."

"Yeah! He led Capella and the other Cultists away from us and we got away easily!"

"Enough, Garf! You *know* that's not why he did it! He ran away because he was trying to protect the Witch! We didn't factor into his decision at all."

Garfiel looked at her skeptically. "And what would you have wanted him to do instead? Stay with us and fight Capella again? We didn't have much luck last time. Imagine if her friends in the Cult had joined the fight. They would have ripped us all apart!"

"His actions are not the issue, Garf!" Rem said through clenched teeth. "His intentions are!"

"So the Captain did the right thing for the wrong reason and that's why you're pissed," Garfiel said sarcastically.

"Garf! What happens next time?"

"Next time?"

"Yes. What happens if your precious Subaru Natsuki gets us all into another situation like that? When Capella found us, Subaru managed to come up with a plan that kept us all alive. What happens if next time he can only save one person? Do you really think that he'd pick you?"

Garfiel stared at her in amazement. "Of course not," Garfiel answered. "That thought never even entered my mind. If we wind up like Doug and Susan in the burning tower someday and there's only room for one person in the escape, the Captain is just going to save the person most dear to him. That ain't me. And if someday I had to make that same call, I wouldn't be saving the Captain either. And Rem? Just for the record, I never thought that if it really came down to it, you'd choose to save me before anyone else. We all have somebody we'll die to protect and folks that we'll only protect

if we can. It's just that simple. Why are you holding the Captain to a standard that you yourself can't meet?"

Rem glared at him. "This is different!"

"Why?"

"Garf," Rem grated. "Subaru abandoned us for a Witch! He decided that he loved a Witch more than he loved his friends! He decided that he trusted a Witch more than the people who had stood by him and would have done anything for him! What kind of man does anything like that? Subaru Natsuki was never the man that he let us think he was. Subaru has betrayed us all."

Garfiel shook his head and sighed.

Julius, Aldebaran, and Felix were exhausted. They had left the capitol yesterday morning and ridden all night to reach the village of Iruk as fast as possible.

They had crossed the border by skirting the cursed Elior forest and now found themselves in Iruk.

The riding dragons were exhausted. The three riders hid their mounts near the village and left them with food and water to rest and recover while they went to investigate.

Julius and Felix had taken off their knightly uniforms to remain inconspicuous although they both wore their swords. Julius was wearing clothing that any traveler might have had chosen: brown pants and a plain white shirt.

Felix had returned to wearing his dress with obvious delight. Julius had delicately attempted to explain to his long time friend that, while he completely supported Felix's fashion choices, perhaps wearing a colorful and flowery dress when they were trying to remain inconspicuous was not the best strategy. Felix had declined to pick up on his friend's subtle hint and Julius had let the matter drop.

Julius was forced to admit that Felix's fashion sense was the least of their worries. Al's normal clothing was odd but not something that would instinctively make one think of either Lagunica or knights but Al had flatly refused to remove his helmet.

Julius understood the kingdom's desire to have the three factions work in unison on this investigation but he was rapidly starting to wish that the kingdom had just sent him north alone.

The three stood hidden in the trees a short distance from the village, inspecting the scene.

"Well, you don't see that everyday, nya," Felix observed.

The village was festooned in huge icicles like giant stalagmites growing out of the ground. Some of them were larger than trees.

"Yup," Al replied. "I think I'm glad that I missed this fight."

"So what should we do, nya? Just fan out around the village and try to blend in?"

Julius sighed. "My friends, I think that perhaps... blending in is beyond the realm of possibility at the moment."

"Why are we making this so complicated?" Al asked. "It's not like anyone here is a serious threat. Let's just walk in, ask our questions, and walk back out."

"What makes you so certain that they'll answer us?" Julius muttered.

Al tossed a small pouch in the air and then caught it again. The bag made a tinkling sound. "Lady Priscilla thinks of these things. I'm sure they'll be only too happy to tell us whatever we want to know."

Julius made a face but he had no better ideas so the three walked into the village.

It was immediately apparent that blending in would have been a futile effort no matter what they had worn. The entire village was on edge after the recent battle and the three strangers approaching brought out a cry of alarm from the locals. The villagers crowded together nervously to see what their intentions were.

Al snorted. "What did that report say? That the witch killed a couple hundred people?" He murmured to Felix and Julius. "There aren't more than a few dozen people living here!"

The three approached the crowd.

"So, is this Iruk?" Al asked without preamble.

A tall man in ratty clothing and a florid face was pushed forward by the crowd. He swallowed hard and nodded.

"Great. We have some questions about the recent attack. We have gold. Answer our questions and we'll give you gold. Sound good?"

Julius felt slightly pained by the bluntness of this approach but he couldn't argue with its effectiveness. It was obvious by their excited faces that the villagers were now firmly willing to cooperate.

"Are you here to ask about the witch?" The tall man asked.

"Yup. What happened?"

The tall man scratched his chin. "How much do we get if we tell you?"

Al shrugged. "You answer my questions, you get the bag of gold. I like to keep things simple. Where did the witch come from?"

The tall man thought for a moment. "We don't really know. She was apparently staying in that house where the strangers lived."

"They weren't there a few days ago," An old woman shouted. "I live across the way so I keep an eye on that place. That house has been empty for months. A woman came in the dead of night a few days back. Then two more showed up the same way."

"Alright, who lived in that house?" Al continued.

The villagers looked at one another.

The tall man shrugged. "Nobody lived there. They were strangers."

"They were strangers but they had their own house here?" Al asked skeptically.

The tall man hesitated seeming to struggle to put his thoughts into words. "They were outsiders, OK? Folks pop by once in a while and go into that house. They kept to themselves and we ignored them. No one ever stayed more than a few days."

The crowd murmured in agreement.

"That's small town life for you, I suppose," Al mused. "OK, fine. Who came to that house?"

"There were three women and a man," A man with pockmarks all over his face said. "There was the witch, a grown woman, and a girl."

"Any idea who the girl was?" Al asked.

A woman shrugged. "Only saw her once. She was dressed like the child of a nobleman."

"Any idea who the *other* woman was?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"This is going nowhere fast," Al grumbled to himself. Al thought about it and then moved on. "OK, let's get back to the witch. When did you guys realize that she was in the village?"

"Well, that strange woman came into the village around sunrise," A fat man remembered.

"The witch?"

"No, the other pretty lady. The one with the big boobs!" He said with a foolish smile.

Al sighed. "Look, buddy, I like breasts as much as the next man. Probably more. My years of working for my employer have made me quite the connoisseur-

Julius winced at that comment.

"-But does this have anything to do with the witch who wrecked your town?"

"Yeah! The witch was fighting that woman!" The fat man replied.

Al paused for a moment in thought. "OK. Anyone know what they were fighting over?"

The villagers shook their heads.

"OK, what did the witch do after the fight?"

"She was hurt real bad," One woman recalled. "The boy came out and bought a wagon. Then he brought the witch out of the house, all swaddled in blankets. He and the other girl loaded the witch in a wagon and left."

"What about the boy?" Al replied.

"He bought some food and then he left," Another woman recalled. "We tried to stop him but..." She trailed off.

"The little fink drew steel on us!" An old man spat. "We were just trying to protect our homes but he drew a sword on us and told us to back down or he'd kill the lot of us! He's a Witch Cultist for sure!"

"We let them leave," The tall man continued. "We'd already been through enough. We aren't going to risk our necks to kill a witch. That's our lord's job."

"Makes sense to me," Al shrugged. "Say, does anyone know the boy's name?"

"Subaru," A young girl replied.

The villagers looked at her in surprise.

"How do you know that?" Al asked.

"The witch kept screaming it during the fight. She was saying stuff like: 'You will never touch my Subaru ever again!'"

"Huh," Al murmured. "So what then? They all just left?"

"Yeah. The witch, the boy, and the girl from the house went north in the wagon," A young girl said. "Dunno what happened to the other one."

"OK, what about that woman the witch was fighting?" Al asked.

"She's over there," The fat man pointed around the back of a nearby house. "We tried to clean up the mess but couldn't. It's all frozen solid."

Al cocked his head at the man but agreeably walked over to where he was directed.

Al turned the corner then stopped in his tracks. He let out a low whistle. "Holy shit. Hey, Julius! Get over here for a minute!"

Julius glanced at Felix and then walked over to Al. Felix followed close behind.

Julius turned the corner and his jaw dropped. Frozen in a heap against the side of the house's cracked and broken stone wall were the shattered remains of a woman encased in solid ice. Her body was in pieces, frozen to the ground and her skin was sprouting completely unnatural looking ice flowers all over her body.

"Well, that's pretty gross, nya. Thanks for sharing this with us, Al," Felix muttered.

"Yeah but is that who I think it is?" Al asked. "Is that the Bowel Hunter?"

Julius and Felix looked closer at the woman's frozen corpse.

"Nya! I think it is!"

"The witch killed the Bowel Hunter?" Julius murmured. "Was the Bowel Hunter tracking down the witch or was the witch hunting the Hunter?"

"That's clever, Julius, nya," Felix chuckled.

"Is there any connection between the Bowel Hunter and the Witch? Or between the Bowel Hunter and Subaru Natsuki?" Julius asked.

"Nya. Well, they met before," Felix said. "The Bowel Hunter almost killed Subaru."

Julius looked at Felix in surprise. "I never heard about that!"

"No? Didn't Reinhard tell you, nya? That's how they first met."

Julius frowned, thinking back. "I remember Reinhard saying that he rescued Subaru Natsuki when the boy was forced to fight unarmed against an enemy to protect Miss Felt," He replied. Julius's eyes widened. "Subaru Natsuki tried to fight the Bowel Hunter *bare-handed*?!"

"Nya, it didn't go very well," Felix said calmly. "I was one of the healers treating him after Elsa Granhiert attacked him."

Julius was beyond shocked. Truthfully, he had not taken his dear friend's stories about his newfound master's incredible courage and kindness very seriously. Julius loved Reinhard like a brother but he was well aware that Reinhard was rather naive. Julius had largely assumed that Subaru Natsuki had simply found some way to mislead or trick Reinhard into having such a ludicrously high opinion of him.

But some acts truly were impressive. The Bowel Hunter was the terror of the continent. Julius was confident that he could have faced her as long as he had his sword. But without it?

Julius was honest enough with himself to admit that, in a similar situation, he would have run like a rabbit. He would have stood his ground to protect Lady Anastasia, with the full understanding that he was sacrificing his life for her, but to throw away his life for complete strangers?

Perhaps he had grossly underestimated Subaru Natsuki.

Of course, there was another possibility.

"Felix," Julius began. "Is there any chance that the fight could have been staged?"

"Nya?" Felix asked, cocking his head.

"Subaru Natsuki's encounter with Elsa Granhiert," Julius said slowly. "Could it have been arranged by mutual

contrivance to allow Subaru Natsuki to look like a hero without ever actually being in danger?"

Felix looked at Julius incredulously. "Nya. Julius, I don't like Subaru either but that's just stupid. There were four of us trying to save him that night and frankly, I had almost no hope. He came within inches of dying. It's an absolute miracle that Subaru lived at all, much less made a complete recovery."

Julius nodded. Julius had complete faith in Felix's judgment. If Felix said that it wasn't possible then it wasn't possible.

Felix's eyes narrowed however. Julius's question had raised an idea for Felix. *A miracle?* Felix thought. *How did he survive that injury, nya? There was no way that he should have survived. Did he have help? Could he have offered the Witch her freedom in exchange for his own life? Maybe I should talk to Crusch about this, nya.*

Felix shook himself out of his reverie when he realized that Al was walking back over to the villagers.

Julius and Felix followed behind.

"One last question: How many people got hurt during this fight?" He asked casually.

The tall man scoffed. "Look at all the damage she did?!"

"Yeah, thanks, I have eyes," Al replied calmly. "That doesn't answer my question. How many people got hurt or killed?"

The villagers grumbled. They clearly didn't like the answer that they were forced to give.

"Cool. Thanks for the info," Al said, casually dropping the money pouch on the ground.

Al turned around without a word and started walking back toward the riding dragons, whistling a happy tune.

Julius bit his lip looking at the money pouch and then back at the villagers' greedy faces. He had been wondering how Al would divvy out the reward. It was now apparent that Al didn't care about doing so. He had simply dropped the reward at the hungry villagers' feet and made the question of how equitably the reward was shared among the locals *their* problem.

This went quite a bit beyond the bounds of knightly behavior but Al and Felix were already walking out of the village and Julius reluctantly hurried after them. He had no authority to deal with this dispute in Gusteko and the more attention he drew to himself, the more likely it was that he was going to be revealed as a foreign knight, further entangling his kingdom in this international incident.

The three remounted their cranky riding dragons. They had been fed and rested but they were still tired.

"OK so it appears that most of Voivode's complaint was lies," Al muttered.

"Nobody was hurt at all, nya," Felix agreed. "And at least arguably the witch was acting in self-defense when she fought the Bowel Hunter."

"So shall we return to the capitol now?" Julius asked.

Al snorted. "Be serious, Jules. The dragons won't go half that distance right now. They need to rest."

"Nya. But we need to report to Crusch immediately!" Felix protested.

"That's why we're headed to Ganaks," Al replied.

"Ganaks?" Julius asked.

"Yeah. It's the closest town over the border. They have a communication system there. We can report our findings to the capitol instantly. More importantly, we can get a good night's sleep in a real bed before we head back," Al explained.

Reinhard had provided the spirits with a small but well-furnished room in the Astrea Manor. There was a spacious bed and comfortable chairs. The room could easily have been used to host visiting nobility.

The spirits neither noticed nor cared about the provided luxury.

Puck was splayed out face down on the bed. He hadn't moved in hours and he had no interest in moving.

With their magic shackled, neither spirit had given much thought to trying to leave the room. Puck couldn't even climb off the bed without assistance from Beatrice.

Beatrice paced around in circles, talking about magic, their mother, and their shared history. This was the first time the siblings had been left alone in days and Beatrice was eager to discuss what she had discovered. She was completely unaware that she really didn't have an audience as Puck was completely focused on his own misery.

I lost my Subaru and I have no way to get him back... With this accursed slave collar wrapped around my wrist, I'm as helpless as a real cat.

I waited four hundred years to find him and I lost him in just a few weeks. Now he's off somewhere in the wilds. I don't know if he's lost or hurt or if he's even still...

I can't believe what a failure I am...

I should have murdered the witch the instant that I realized what she was. It might have even broken her spell. It's... not impossible...

Even if slaying the witch didn't break the spell, even if Subaru hated me or even killed me for it, at least he'd still be safe! Reinhard and Felt would have taken good care of him and Betty would be there.

Subaru would be safe and he'd be alright... without me...

Now, because I hesitated when Subaru needed me to be decisive, I've lost him. Maybe I've lost him for good.

I spent four hundred years roaming the world in a desperate search for 'that person.'

I'd started to think that I'd never find them and that my creator had given me this impossible geas out of some kind of sadistic amusement.

Then I met Subaru and all those lonely centuries suddenly became worth it. I found meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in my life all in an instant.

I knew in that moment that I'd destroy the world to protect him. A world without Subaru would be the worst hell imaginable. But as long as Subaru was there, the world was a wonderful place.

Subaru's heart is too big for his own good. He tries to help everyone. And he's a wonderful person. I love that about him. But when he declared that he was going to help a Witch of all people, that was when I needed to put my foot down and demand that he get away from her.

Even if he refused to let me kill her, if the witch had just been sent out into the wilds alone, Subaru would still be here and... we'd all be together...

This bed should have Subaru in it. It's too big just for Betty and me. I never imagined that a stupid piece of furniture could make someone feel so lonely...

Beatrice abruptly stopped pacing. "There is no other possible conclusion, in fact!" She said triumphantly. Beatrice had been talking about her theory for the better part of two hours. Puck was barely listening, often just looking off into the distance with a defeated expression or burying his face in the bed and wishing that he could just pass out.

"What does Bubby think?" Beatrice asked.

It took Puck a moment to even muster the energy to reply. "What do I think about what?" Puck asked, not bothering to try and conceal the fact that he hadn't been listening.

Beatrice fumed. "Mother! What does Bubby think about Betty and Bubby's mother being the one who rescued Subaru?!"

Puck sighed. "Betty, are you... sure about this? Neither of us had heard from your mother in centuries. We both figured that she was long since dead. Now you think that she's been wandering around the world all this time?"

"Yes! Betty is certain, in fact!"

Puck did not look altogether pleased by this. "Betty, so what would that mean? Your mother didn't die, she just abandoned us? I wouldn't exactly be thrilled to hear that."

Beatrice flushed. "Mother did not abandon Betty and Bubby!" She protested sullenly. "Mother gave Betty and Bubby their important tasks, in fact! Betty to guard the library until the arrival of 'that person' and Puck to locate and protect 'that person.' It makes perfect sense that Mother would return for her children once she knew that Betty and Bubby's important tasks were complete!"

Puck sniffed. "Then where is she?" He muttered.

Betty frowned. "Maybe Mother is with Betty's Subaru? Perhaps she used her magic to save Subaru from the red knight and is now planning to help Subaru come and rescue Betty and Bubby, in fact!"

Puck glanced away, seeming to choose his words carefully. "Betty, are you really sure that this was your mother's power that you were lent? Maybe it was someone else who just *felt* like your mother. I mean, if your mother *did* give you the power to open that portal then why didn't she try to save us too?"

Betty snorted and looked away from Puck, seemingly offended. "Betty knows the touch of Mother's power! She would never mistake it. There is no doubt that Mother gave Betty the ability to open the portal to save Betty's Subaru, in fact!"

Puck noticed that Betty had ignored the second half of his question but he let the matter drop. He laid his face back down on the bed and considered taking a nap.

Beatrice resumed pacing around the room. "Betty and Bubby need to get out of here! Betty's Subaru needs them! Betty's Mother needs them too, in fact!"

"And how do we plan to do that?" Puck muttered, his voice muffled since his face was pressed against the bed covers. "I doubt that Felt and Reinhard will just let us walk out the door. Especially if we tell them that we're going to go looking for Subaru. They might even try to follow us and hope that we'd lead them to Subaru. What's worse is that we still have these stupid magic suppressing bracelets on!" Puck growled, shaking his arm angrily. "Unless we can get these off,

we're completely helpless! We could be taken prisoner by a group of school children who wanted pets!"

Beatrice fumed and stamped one tiny foot. "Betty hates this! Betty wants her magic back! Betty wants her Subaru! Betty wants her Mother!"

"Believe me, Betty, I totally agree with you-" Puck replied. *Well, I agree with most of what you're saying anyway*, He thought. "-But before we can do anything else, we need to figure out how to get these bracelets off! We'll never escape until we do. And worse, even if we did escape, we have no idea where Subaru is! We can't sense him as long as we have these bracelets on! So our first priority needs to be to figure out how to get them off! Any ideas?"

Beatrice sighed. "Evil Sealing Stone Bracelets are very hard to remove, I suppose. They require immense power to unseal. The red knight could do it-"

"But he won't, Puck said dismissively. "Reinhard still isn't convinced that the witch didn't put us under some kind of spell just like she did to Subaru."

Beatrice rolled her eyes. "The blue maid is too weak but she wouldn't do it for Betty and Bubby anyway."

Puck frowned. "What about Garf? He's pretty strong and he might do it for us if we asked him."

Beatrice rocked her hand back and forth uncertainly. "It's... possible. Betty isn't sure if he's strong enough, I suppose." Beatrice sighed. She shook her head angrily. "Where is Roswaal when he'd finally be useful, I suppose?!"

Puck snorted. "He might be useful but I won't ever make the mistake of trusting him again after that Sanctuary fiasco! If Roswaal was here, it's an open question if he'd free us or try to take us hostage to get leverage over Subaru!"

The pair were silent for a time.

"Betty, can you think of anyone else who could take these bracelets off us?"

Beatrice flushed and shook her head. "Betty... doesn't know many people, I suppose." She thought for a moment. "Betty expects that Subaru or the elf could do it."

"Yeah but if we were still with them, we'd have never had these bracelets put on in the first place," Puck sighed.

Beatrice climbed up on the bed and sat next to Puck.

Puck started to doze.

"Something went wrong, in fact," Beatrice murmured after a time.

Her intense, worried tone pulled Puck back from sleep. "A lot's gone wrong, Betty," Puck muttered, his face pressed into the covers. "What are you talking about?"

Beatrice was quiet for a long moment. "Something went wrong with Mother's portal. Someone... something interfered."

Puck looked up and saw that Beatrice's face was deeply concerned.

"What are you saying?" Puck asked in rising fear.

Beatrice looked worried, even afraid. "Subaru and the elf did *not* end up where Betty's mother wanted them to..."

"Well, we need to go shopping for traveling supplies," Subaru said, trying to write a shopping list in his head as Patrasche raced across the plain. "Mili, do we need anything for the cottage while I'm there?"

"Wait, aren't you guys going to come back to Siros with me?" Anri said sounding hurt.

"We're just hedging our bets, Anri," Subaru said. "You don't know how folks in Siros will react to you hosting us. If we need to get out of there to protect you, I want to have a backup plan ready."

Anri looked offended. "Subaru, what kind of girl do you think I am?! You've both helped me so much already. I would never turn my back on you."

"Anri," Emilia said firmly. "We would never allow you to be put in the position where you had to make such a choice."

Patrasche flew down the road leading to Ganaks. The city was clearly visible in the distance. It looked like an immense walled fortress that was literally carved out of the mountain. At its front was a mammoth water wheel at least a hundred feet tall, turning ponderously under the flow of the enormous waterfall it sat under. Behind the wall was a towering spire of rock. The city looked like a mountain that had been shaved, with the peak still present in the middle and the rest of the mountain had been dug up and ground down.

"Well, that's pretty impressive," Subaru said.

Anri nodded. "Ganaks is kind of a sore point between Lagunica and Gusteko," Anri commented.

"Why is that, Anri?" Emilia asked.

"Ganaks used to be part of Gusteko," Anri replied.

"Wait, really?" Subaru asked in surprise.

"Yeah! I read about it a lot growing up. It's kind of a big deal back home. As a matter of fact, Ganaks used to be the capitol about two hundred years ago. Then Gusteko attacked Lagunica but the dragon appeared to defend the kingdom and Gusteko was defeated in a terrible rout. Lagunica captured a big slice of southern Gusteko including Ganaks. The nobility considered this the final straw in a series of incompetent decisions by the King and they rebelled. When the dust settled, Gusteko had fragmented from a strong monarchy into a loose confederation of states and the former royal family wasn't strong enough to force the nobility back in line. The dominant power in the country became the church and the former royals were re-dubbed House Griest."

"I never heard that story," Subaru murmured. "And I thought that I studied this area."

"Why were you studying Ganaks, Subaru?" Emilia asked.

"Well, I didn't study Ganaks specifically," Subaru explained. "But I did study the politics and history of a lot of northern Lagunica. After all, that was where Roswaal's domain was and I figured it would be fertile ground for us to find support."

"Don't beat yourself up, Subaru. I get the impression that Lagunica really wants to sweep that bit of history under the rug," Anri added. "Grandfather told me that even a few centuries later, there's a large undercurrent in Ganaks that isn't happy under Lagunican rule and would rather rejoin Gusteko. Don't ask me why anyone would want to be part of Sanshi but there it is. Apparently, Ganaks has a military governor in the city in order to keep the peace. There used to be riots in this town pretty regularly."

Subaru thought about that. "Anything else about Ganaks we should know?"

Anri thought a moment. "I know that it has a lowest demi-human population in Lagunica," She remembered. "Ganaks's wealth comes from the great mine. When it was part of Gusteko, demi-human slaves worked the mines but Lagunica had outlawed slavery so following the conquest of Ganaks, the demi-humans were set free. The locals were pretty angry about that. Racial violence is pretty common in Ganaks so the demi-humans steadily migrated out. There are only a few thousand left in a city with a population of a hundred thousand. They all live in the slums and work in the mines."

Subaru glimpsed a piece of paper nailed to a post as they fly past. He reined in Patrasche and slid down.

"Subaru?" Emilia asked. "What are you doing?"

Subaru walked back to the post and pulled the sheet of paper down, reading it with a dark expression.

"What is it?" Anri asked.

"'Lost Princess,'" Subaru read. "'House Griest is offering a sizable reward for any information regarding the location of Princess Kairei vas Sirosse an Ithil. She is missing and believed kidnapped by outlaws. House Griest is terribly worried about her and requests any assistance in order to find her. Reward: Five hundred gold pieces.'"

Subaru shook his head. "Well, isn't that just great. There's even a picture. Good likeness, too," He admitted, passing the flyer to Anri.

"*Five hundred gold pieces?!'*" Anri demanded in outrage. "Malcolm an Griest thinks that my capture is only worth *five hundred gold pieces?!'* I can't believe that he's so cheap!"

Subaru raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, Anri," Subaru said sarcastically. "If I ever speak to Prince Malcolm, I'll be sure to let him know that you find his attempts to locate, capture, and most likely execute you on a *budget* very offensive."

"I agree, Anri," Emilia said in disbelief. "I think that you're worrying about the wrong aspect of this." Emilia frowned. "Subaru, if these flyers are common around here than we can't risk bringing Anri to Ganaks."

Subaru nodded. "Yeah and it gets even worse."

"Worse?" Emilia asked in surprise.

Subaru pulled a second notice off the post. "'Be on the lookout for a foul witch. This silver haired half-devil...' What the fuck, '*half devil?!'*" He demanded of nobody.

Emilia bowed her head, looking miserable.

Subaru shook his head with a scowl. "For God's sake, we actually competed to rule this festering kingdom?! Why? We should have packed up all our friends and moved out of country and then burnt the place to the fucking ground!"

"I hear that Siros is nice," Anri commented.

Subaru looked at her.

Anri shrugged. "Just in case you were looking for a new home."

Subaru chuckled. He continued reading. "'This witch is believed to have enchanted Subaru Natsuki and is attempting to spread chaos and pestilence throughout Lagunica. Kill on sight.' Oh, for fuck's sake!" He said, hurling the flyer to the ground.

"Is there a picture?" Anri asked.

"No. But it hardly matters, does it?" Subaru said, remounting Patrasche. "Nobody would have much trouble picking Emilia out of a crowd."

Emilia didn't say anything.

"Well, one thing is obvious," Subaru muttered. "Neither one of you can go to Ganaks right now."

Honestly, this is a lucky break for me! I don't have to let Emilia go somewhere dangerous now! I have the perfect excuse to leave her behind somewhere safe!

"What?!" Emilia objected.

"Subaru, I have to go with you!" Anri shouted.

"Whoah, whoah! One at a time, please!" Subaru complained.

"Subaru," Emilia said in a dangerous voice. "You have to stop treating me like a porcelain doll!"

"Emilia, this is different!"

"How? How is this different?!" She demanded.

"You know how!" Subaru shouted. "Don't be obtuse! People are actively looking for you around here. If you guys come into Ganaks, you'll just attract more attention. Nobody there is looking for me or has any idea what I look like. I can go in, do the shopping, and get out. Nice and easy. You coming isn't making anyone safer, it's just adding more risk."

"Subaru!" Emilia protested.

"Emilia," He said simply. "You know that I'm right."

"Then let me come with you, Subaru," Anri said. "The authorities in Ganaks don't have any kind of relationship with Sanshi. If I was discovered, so what? Lagunica isn't going to hand me over to Malcolm an Griest."

Subaru snorted. "You're giving the authorities here way too much credit. I met the governor once, General Brendig. He'd not only capture and sell you to Sanshi, he'd frame it to the sages' council as a means to improve Gustekan-Lagunican relations instead of just an excuse to line his own pocket!"

Anri shook her head. "Look, Subaru, I... I just have this feeling! I really need to go with you!" She said awkwardly.

"No," Subaru said flatly.

"Subaru," Emilia objected. "I don't like the idea of you going to Ganaks alone either."

"It'll be fine, Mili," Subaru assured her. "I'm just going shopping and to deliver a letter. Even I can't screw that up too badly."

"You shouldn't go alone, Subaru!" Anri agreed. "Let me come!"

Subaru ignored her and scanned the wide plain around Ganaks.

"There's an old abandoned farm house back in those trees. I doubt that it'll be comfortable but you should both be safe there and out of sight for a few hours."

Subaru directed Patrasche over to the farm house and reined her in beneath the shadow of the trees.

Subaru helped Anri slip down and then Emilia.

"Subaru," Emilia said pensively. "I don't like this."

"Me neither!" Anri agreed. "Let me come with you!"

"I'll be fine, Mili," Subaru assured her, ignoring Anri. "I'll be in and out."

Emilia bit her lip.

"Subaru!" Anri protested.

"Anri! You're not coming!" He said firmly.

Anri scowled.

Subaru looked at the distressed Emilia. "I'll be fine, Mili," He reassured her. "I'll keep my head down and stay out of trouble."

Emilia gave him a worried look but finally nodded.

Anri sighed and unbuckled her rapier. "Here, Subaru, take this," She said, passing him the sword belt.

"Are you sure?" Subaru asked dubiously. "I hate to leave you unarmed."

Anri snorted. "Right back at you!" She said mockingly. "And you might avoid some trouble just because people can see that you *are* armed. Predators tend to avoid prey that can defend itself. I can't use my sword for another day or two anyway," She gestured toward her broken arm. "Besides, I've got Emilia here. She can fend off a regiment singlehandedly."

Emilia smiled warmly at Anri.

Subaru sighed. "Well, try not to test that theory while I'm gone, please?" He said buckling the belt around his waist.

Anri nodded. "Here. This is the letter. You should probably send it to my Grandfather. My uncle might be on the front lines right now," Anri said, passing him a piece of paper.

"What's his name? I doubt that this will work if I just say: 'A letter for Anri's grandfather.'"

Anri rolled her eyes at him. "Tell them that it's a letter for Patriarch Gustov of Siros. They'll know who it is."

"OK," Subaru replied.

"Be careful and don't take too long!" Emilia said.

Subaru nodded and rode away.

Reinhard and Felt sat side by side in the carriage. Ram sat on the other seat, looking out the window with a bored expression.

The pair seemed to be looking every way except at one another.

"Miss Felt," Reinhard murmured. "Are you... feeling better?"

Felt took a deep breath. "Don't worry about me, Red. I'm tough as iron. That Witch would have had to work a lot harder than that to break me... Thanks for asking, though," She added.

They were silent a moment.

Felt coughed. "Reinhard, were you able to... *obscure* the spirits' involvement in Subaru's escape?"

Reinhard nodded. "I was guided by you in this matter, Miss Felt. As you predicted, the sages who heard my report assumed without question that it was the Witch who opened the portal, not Miss Beatrice. They did not ask me for confirmation and so I was not required to correct them."

Felt sighed in relief. "Good. I was worried that the sages' council might have tried to seize or even destroy the spirits if they knew that the spirits had helped a Witch escape."

"Luckily, that does not appear to be the case, Miss Felt. I'm sure that the sages consider the spirits to be largely beneath their notice," He said.

Reinhard frowned. "Forgive me, Miss Felt, but... are you *certain* that the spirits do not share Subaru's bewitchment? They did help the Witch to escape, after all."

"They helped *Subaru* to escape," Felt corrected. "You can't talk to them for five minutes without realizing that they hate the Witch. But after Rem's...", Felt's voice trailed off in a snarl.

Reinhard's face was grim as he met Felt's eyes and they shared a moment of silent fury at the blue haired maid's betrayal.

Felt shook her head and sighed. "Reinhard, you have to remember that Rem convinced the spirits that we *all* wanted Subaru dead! I don't blame the spirits for trying to protect him from us under those kind of conditions. I would have done the same thing! Believe me, the spirits' loyalty to Subaru is ironclad. They'll do whatever they have to in order to protect him. The problem is that Subaru believes that he's in love with the Witch and that leaves the spirits in a tight spot..."

Reinhard shook his head. "I confess that I'm... less certain of their loyalties, Miss Felt. I'm worried that the spirits might in some way have been corrupted by their time spent with the Witch. We should devote ourselves to hunting her down and ending her as quickly as possible in order to free our friend from her web of lies."

Felt bit her lip. *Beatrice said that killing the Witch would make Subaru try to kill himself... Until we sever the connection, killing the witch is a no-no. Or at least we need to be ready to protect Subaru from doing any kind of self-harm until we can break the spell.*

The problem is, I know that this is the wrong time to tell Red about this. He's already suspicious of Beatrice. If I tell him that she's warning us not to kill the Witch, he'll take it as confirmation that the Witch has corrupted her. I need to tell him about this but I'd better wait until he's had time to realize that Beatrice is still Beatrice.

Anyway, even Reinhard isn't going to be able to find Subaru for a good long while. Subaru's too clever. Plus, Subaru is safely over the border into Gusteko and that means Reinhard can't reach him.

"Miss Felt," Reinhard murmured.

Felt started, realizing that she had been lost in her own thoughts. "Yeah, Red?"

Reinhard looked at her intently. "Miss Felt, I hope that you will accept my most sincere apologies for all of this."

Felt blinked. "Apologies? What do you have to apologize for?"

Reinhard hung his head like a little boy fearing that he was about to be scolded. "This fiasco is entirely my fault, Miss Felt," Reinhard sighed. "If I hadn't been such a fool as to fall for Roswaal's transparent trick, Subaru never would have been bewitched and you never would have been so grievously wounded by this foul witch."

Felt shook her head. "None of this was your fault, Reinhard," She said gently, taking his hand. "Roswaal tricked all of us, not just you. Even Subaru was fooled. Nobody is ever going to be careful enough or smart enough to not be conned once in a while. What's important is that when we needed you, you *were* there. You ran yourself ragged trying to find Subaru and the spirits. You," Felt's voice dropped to a whisper. "You even held me together when I was ready to fall to pieces... Thank you for that."

Reinhard took a deep breath. "Your thanks are completely unnecessary, Miss Felt. It was my great privilege to offer my feeble support to a brave and noble hearted woman such as yourself. I can think of no higher honor than being permitted to be of service to you in a time of need."

Felt looked Reinhard in the eye and swallowed hard. She seemed to be searching for what she wanted to say.

She hesitated and then deliberately coarsened her voice. "Anyway, Red, stop blaming yourself for this mess like a dope. The only person to blame here is the witch and we are going to make her *very* sorry that she ever thought up this scheme! Then we are going to get our gang back together and put Subaru on the throne!"

Reinhard nodded firmly. "I look forward to that, Miss Felt. Thank you for your wise counsel. You are truly a wonder, resolute and steadfast as the northern star. I'm not sure what I would do without you to keep me true to my course."

Felt's mouth moved but no words emerged. She moistened her lips and seemed to be at a loss for what to say.

"We've arrived," Ram said in a bored tone, making both of them jump. They'd completely forgotten that she was even in the carriage.

Felt glared daggers at Ram but Ram either didn't notice or didn't care.

The sun was setting as Subaru approached the huge gate of the great city of Ganaks. The enormous water wheel was even more impressive close up, grinding steadily as the water kept falling. The water in the pool below the wheel stank of chemicals.

This is a mining town. They probably use that wheel to help crush ore and then dump the contaminants into the pool. Very forward thinking of them. That way they're spreading their poisons all the way down river.

The city walls had to be forty feet high and they completely encircled a city that was miles and miles across. All that could be seen of the city inside was a titanic rock formation rising up from behind the walls like a mountain.

There was only one gate into or out of Ganaks, an enormous gateway like a mountain pass that was guarded by a massive portcullis.

Since there was only one way in or out of the city, the entrance was always swarming with travelers. To facilitate easier travel, the authorities had divided the gate into two sets of three lanes, one for incoming traffic and one for outgoing. In the first lane were people mounted on swift two-legged riding dragons. In the second lane were wagons pulled by four-legged earth dragons. In the last lane were pedestrians and the slow wagons pulled by trudging people.

Subaru moved through the gate quickly. Due to the sheer amount of traffic, the gate guards settled on keeping an eye on the crowd at large and didn't bother to inspect any individuals.

Beyond the gate, the city lay spread out before him. The city seemed to be built in levels. The center of the city was the enormous spire of rock. It had whole posh neighborhoods and many roads spiraling up to the summit. Inside the great walls there was also an enormous open pit the size of a canyon.

That must be the Great Ganaks Mine, Subaru mused.

The pit looked like a strip mine, a vast open wound in the earth punctuated by several deeper pits within it and a few shaft tunnels as well. Homes were built around and even *inside* the pit but these were much shabbier than the others that Subaru saw.

There were levels on the lower part of the great spire that looked as if they catered to business and the middle class.

Subaru briefly paused Patrasche after entering the gate, wondering where to go. There was a massive suspension bridge that led from the gate to the nicer neighborhoods on the great spire. There were also two ramps that led down toward the shabby houses and the mine.

"Hey!" A crude voice shouted from behind Subaru. "Stop holding up the line!"

Subaru nudged Patrasche and they trotted quickly across the suspension bridge. On the other end was a posh neighborhood that reminded him of the royal district in the capitol. The homes were palatial and the stores dealt in

exotic luxuries.

Hell. I have no idea where to go. Where do you find a store to buy a tent? For that matter, where do you find a communications system?

"Hm. Excuse me, buddy!" Subaru called out to a guard.

"Sir!" The guard snapped to attention.

"I was looking to buy a tent. Any suggestions on where I could find one?"

The guard thought for a moment. "There's a branch of the Hoshin Trading Company two streets that way, sir. They'll likely have whatever you need."

"Thank you!" Subaru replied. "Oh. By the way, would you happen to know where I can find the... communications thing? I need to send a letter to Gusteko immediately."

"The communications system is located in the mayoral palace. It's the largest building around, three blocks over. You can't miss it."

"One more question, have you ever heard of a place called 'Miss Lilian's?'"

"Of course! It's world famous! Straight down this street. Are you new to our city, sir?" The guard asked.

"This is my first visit," Subaru replied.

"A bit of information for you then, sir," The guard pointed down off the spire. "This is 'Hightown,' and as fine a place as you're likely to find in the world. The levels on the spire below this are called 'Midtown.' That's a decent place to find goods and lodgings if your pocket is a bit thin. The neighborhoods that are built *off* the spire are called 'Lowtown.' You can reach those by going down the ramps. You *don't* want to go down that far, sir."

"Um. Why not?"

The guard gave him a puzzled look. "Because the demi-humans live down there, sir. You never know *what* they're scheming."

Subaru didn't answer right away. "Thank you. That was most illuminating," Subaru said in a flat voice.

"At your service, sir! Always!" The guard saluted and returned to his post.

"The sages' council demands answers!" Choi shouted.

Felt stood before the council dressed once again like a young noblewoman. Crusch stood nearby in her uniform.

"I understand that, your Excellency," Felt said politely, albeit through clenched teeth. "However, as of yet, we do not have answers to give you."

"Is that all you have to say?" Choi demanded. "A royal candidate is out wandering the woods with a witch and that's *all that* you have to say?!"

"Lord Subaru may be a royal candidate but he is also a free man!" Felt shouted back. "He is permitted to associate with whomever he wishes. That is not a crime. Beyond that, all we know for certain is that Lord Subaru was last seen in the company of a demi-human woman. Anything beyond that is pure supposition!"

"This silver haired half-elf was recovered from someplace called 'the witch's tomb' and you expect us to believe that she is not a witch?" Choi said. "This woman was powerful enough to escape the Sword Saint without apparent effort and yet you ask us to conclude that she is not a witch?!"

"I 'ask' this council to rely on evidence and not speculation," Felt snapped back, losing her patience. "All we know for certain is that Subaru was seen with an elven woman."

"Although that is *certainly* bad enough," Aghart sneered. "A candidate for the throne of the Dragon Kingdom of Lagunica associating with a demi-human woman? What will the people think?!"

"Perhaps they would think that Lord Subaru is open-minded and nonjudgmental," Felt suggested in a hiss.

"Watch yourself, dust rat!" Aghart snapped. "You stand before the sages' council."

"The girl may speak crudely but she raises a valid point," Dore interjected. "What exactly is Lord Subaru Natsuki accused of?"

Choi stared at Dore as if he was an idiot. "Associating with a witch!" Choi shouted.

"A charge for which I have yet to see *any* evidence," Byrd interjected. "The only fact not in dispute here is that Lord Subaru was last seen in the company of an elven woman. I would take this opportunity to echo Miss Felt and remind this august body that this is *not* a crime. Even if *some* among us would wish otherwise," Byrd finished, with a sour look at Aghart.

Choi shook his head. "Byrd, this hearing is not taking place in a law book. This is a matter of grave concern for the ruling council! What if Subaru Natsuki has been bewitched and enchanted?! What if he has become an agent of this witch due to magic?!"

"What evidence is there of enchantment?" Aghart retorted. "If someone willingly travels with a witch, we should conclude that he is traveling with a witch *willingly*!"

"Oh my," Byrd said with a yawn. "The charges against Subaru Natsuki are certainly piling up now. Could we see evidence supporting *one* of them? Just for variety's sake?"

"That's enough," McMahon gaveled. The ancient man thought for a moment. "Lady Crusch, do you have anything to add?"

Felt glared at Crusch and ground her teeth. *If that bitch slanders Subaru again, I'll punch her right here on the floor of the council chamber and I don't care what the consequences are!*

Crusch looked awkward and cleared her throat. "I have just heard back from our investigators. It appears that Vlad an Voivode... grossly misrepresented the situation of the 'attack' at Iruk. There were no casualties in Iruk at all. It appears that the Witch engaged in a battle with Elsa Granhiert the Bowel Hunter-"

Felt gasped. Images raced through her mind of Subaru's broken body at her grandfather's tavern.

"But the witch managed to kill her. Subaru Natsuki and the Witch appear to have disappeared again in the company of an unknown person. They were last seen headed northwest but we have failed to pick up their trail and we are uncertain if they remain in Gusteko or have returned to Lagunica."

The sages glanced at one another.

Felt carefully hid a smile. *They're impressed that the Witch killed Elsa and they don't know how to react to it! It's taken the wind out of their sails in attacking Subaru. Thanks, bitch! At least you finally did something helpful!*

The sages appeared lost in thought for a long moment although Choi and Aghart looked increasingly annoyed.

Byrd cleared his throat. "I move that this... 'hearing' be dismissed due to lack of evidence so that we can focus our attention on locating Subaru Natsuki."

"Wait," McMahon mused. "Perhaps it would behoove us to perform a brief investigation on the charges of Subaru Natsuki's involvement in witchcraft. This might give us some... deniability with the other nations should new evidence of his malfeasance later come to light."

The other four sages looked at him in surprise.

McMahon stroked his beard. "It would also... remind the public that, even when a new king sits on the throne, this council's authority is still potent and must be respected."

Choi and Aghart nodded while Dore and Byrd appeared dubious.

Crusch looked smug.

"Your Excellencies!" Felt cried out. "I protest! By your own admission, there is *no* evidence supporting these accusations! This isn't an investigation it's a fishing expedition! You're dragging my lord's good name through the mud!"

"Be calm, Miss Felt," McMahon waved his hand dismissively. "If we find no evidence then the investigation shall simply be dismissed. All in favor?"

McMahon, Aghart, and Choi raised their hands.

Felt scowled up at them. "If I may say so, I get the uncomfortable sense that your excellencies are playing politics rather than administering the law."

"Do not grow overbold, Miss Felt," McMahon ordered. "By three to two there shall be an investigation of these allegations against Subaru Natsuki. We are adjourned."

He gaveled.

Felt stormed out of the meeting with a scowl on her face.

Felt found Garfiel leaning against the wall just outside the council chamber.

"You were listening to the hearing?" She muttered.

"Yup. I got here for the tail end of it anyway."

"Any thoughts?"

Garfiel shrugged. "Well... this sure is fucked up," He grumbled. "But at least it looks like they're just blowing smoke and are going to dismiss the charges in a few days anyway."

"They are going to *pay* for this," Felt growled.

"Oh yeah? How's that?" Garfiel asked.

"Come on, fleabag," Felt said, storming away. "Where's Red?"

Garfiel hurried to catch up with her. "Reinhard asked me to say goodbye for him. During the meeting, Heikel showed up and ordered Reinhard to go to Mirula and start combing the desert for the Captain. Apparently, Heikel got a solid tip that Subaru and the witch were seen in the Augria Sand Dunes."

Felt shook her head and scowled. "That fucking asshole. The kingdom knows that Subaru is in Gusteko! Subaru isn't hiding somewhere in the middle of the kingdom just so that Reinhard can catch him! And even if he *was* dumb enough to come back here, there's no way that he made it from Iruk to Mirula in two days! Heikel is just trying to make work for his son."

"Yeah. I think we're going to have to do something about that guy sooner or later," Garfiel grumbled. "Something permanent. Where are we going, anyway?"

Felt growled. "We have a story to tell. We are going to every bar in town."

"Score!" Garfiel cheered.

"Starting with Gramps's," Felt added.

Garfiel's enthusiasm dimmed a bit.

Subaru rode up to a large building with 'The Hoshin Trading Company.'

Subaru slid off Patrasche. "Wait here, OK? I'll be right back."

Patrasche snorted.

Subaru smiled and patted her face affectionately before walking inside.

The building was spacious and elegant but now that Subaru was looking for it, the first thing that jumped out at him was that there wasn't a single demi-human in the place.

"Hello, sir," A man in an elegant looking doublet said. "Can I help you find anything?"

"Yes, actually. I'm looking for a good tent. We're going to be doing a lot of traveling and we'd like to be comfortable."

"Oh, I think I have just what you're looking for," The man led the pair over to a section of the store where the items had an outdoor theme. "This tent is our latest model. Fully waterproof, top quality mystic insulation for withstanding both extreme heat and intense cold, complimentary fire kiln for keeping a fire inside the tent, smoke venting roof, and heavily padded floor. This is the next best thing to being at home. You can also get two sleeping rolls at seventy five percent off by purchasing this tent."

Subaru nodded. "How much?"

"Ten gold pieces."

Damn! That's expensive!

"Sold," Subaru said carelessly. "I also need some bags of preserved food. Some water bottles would be nice too."

Subaru left the store as the sun set. All in all, he'd spent more than twenty gold coins during this shopping trip but Subaru felt like at least they were finally ready for whatever the world could throw at them on this trip.

He struggled to attach the tent to Patrasche's saddlebag.

I know that was a little profligate but I need to remember that I have no idea how this will all turn out. Even if we wind up in Siros safely, our long term goal is still to break the curse on Emilia and reunite with Beatrice and Puck. Once we identify the cure, we have no idea where we might need to go to find it! We might find ourselves going into the tundra of northern Gusteko, the deserts of western Karargi, or the jungles of southern Vollachia. I want to be prepared. The tent should be comfortable and durable and that's important. Our quest might take weeks. Hell, it could take months! We need to be ready to deal with the unexpected. Assuming that we can trust the salesman, and I don't think that Anastasia employs liars, the water bottles are enchanted. They can make potable water from bad water. There's a limit, obviously. It can't work with raw sewage but if we find water that we're slightly iffy about drinking from, we can still refill our supplies and that might be important some day. The food we bought is also high quality and should keep for months without spoiling. Yeah, I spent a lot of gold today but we still have plenty more and I think that we're actually prepared for wherever our journey takes us.

Subaru remounted Patrasche.

"Alright, girl, we just need to mail a letter and then we can head back to Emilia."

Subaru had left Patrasche in a small city park next door to the city hall. Patrasche seemed to appreciate having green grass under her claws rather than hard stone.

The mayoral palace looked more like an administration area than a palace but it was still huge and even after sunset, crowds of people were still coming and going.

Subaru pulled his hood as far over his head as he could then walked up the stairs.

There was a huge lobby inside, stone stairs that climbed up another two levels. There were counters covered by iron bars and a large group of people stood behind the counters, peering through windows in the bars like bank tellers.

Subaru glanced at a city guard standing inside. "Excuse me," He said. "Where can I send a letter via the communications system?"

"Right over there, sir," The guard pointed up the stairs to the second level.

"Thanks," Subaru nodded and marched up the stairs.

Keep your head down, Subaru. There are a lot of guards here. If anyone figures out who you are, you're in for one hell of a fight.

Subaru got to the second level and found a worker that didn't have a line waiting in front of them.

The woman behind the counter was a pretty young blond girl. "Can I help you, sir?" The woman said primly from inside her window.

Subaru pulled Anri's letter out of his pocket. "I need to have this sent to Patriarch Gustov in Siros."

"Of course, sir. And who may I ask is sending it?"

"It's from Anri," Subaru replied. "Err... 'Kairei,'" He amended.

"Excuse me, sir, but you don't look like a 'Kairei.'"

"Take it up with my parents," Subaru deadpanned.

The woman blinked in surprise.

Subaru sighed. "I didn't *write* the letter. I'm just delivering the letter."

"Oh," The woman said in understanding, taking the letter. "We do the need the name of the purchaser if it's not the same as the author."

"Lucas," Subaru replied.

"Last name?"

"I'm a peasant," Subaru said, fighting not to roll his eyes.

"Ah," The woman said, writing a few things down.

"When will this letter be delivered?" Subaru asked.

"It will transmitted within the hour, sir. I can't say how long it will take for the people in Siros to respond and deliver it however."

Probably not long. I'm guessing that letters to Anri's family get priority. Especially if they're from Anri who everyone considers to be missing and in danger right now.

"Alright," The woman finished. "That will be twenty gold coins," She said, sticking out her hand.

What?! Are you serious?! Is this just an excuse to print money or something?

"Problem, sir?" The woman asked in confusion.

"Not at all," Subaru growled, pulling out twenty gold coins.

"Thank you, sir," She said kindly. "Do you want a receipt?"

"No thanks," Subaru muttered turning away.

"Have a wonderful day, sir!" The girl called after him.

Subaru grumbled something under his breath.

Subaru reentered the park and found a full troop of city guards passing by on patrol. Subaru kept his hood low as he walked back to where he'd left Patrasche.

Even after sunset, the park was crowded. The park was full of roses and romantic couples were everywhere. They were

strolling, talking, sniffing the fragrant flowers, or drifting off into shadowy glades for a bit of privacy.

Huh. Too bad I couldn't bring Emilia here. When was the last time I really had an opportunity to take her someplace nice?

Fuck. Have I ever done that?

I'm a pretty shitty boyfriend...

Subaru found Patrasche, sniffing at a rosebush with a happy expression.

Huh. Who would have thought Patrasche was a flower lover.

Or maybe she's just thinking of adding more vegetables to her diet.

Subaru noticed someone else nearby. They were wearing a hood and also sniffing a rose.

Subaru made sure to turn his back to them before speaking to Patrasche.

"Hey there, girl," Subaru said, patting her head. "You ready to get out of this crummy city?"

"Subaru Natsuki?" A voice behind him said in shock.

Subaru spun around before he could think better of it.

The hooded man was wearing a spotless white Royal Guard uniform. He had golden eyes, purple hair, and a refined demeanor but he was staring at Subaru in shock.

"Julius Juukulius," Subaru muttered.

Oh come on!

How the hell did I just bump into this jerkass in a huge city? Do I have some 'Divine Blessing of Bad Luck'?

Or does my Authority just like to watch me suffer...

Actually... that would explain an awful lot...

Alright, well this is bad but it certainly could be worse. Julius sure as hell isn't Reinhard. And frankly, I've wanted to slug Julius ever since that dinner party in the capitol when he spent most of the night fawning all over Emilia.

On the other hand, this is still pretty dangerous. Julius is considered one of the best fighters in the kingdom, plus this park is full of guards, and I'm trapped inside a walled city!

Julius recovered from his moment of shock and gave a slight bow of his head. "I am flattered that you remember me, my lord."

You really shouldn't be. The way you were gushing over Emilia last time we were together burned you into my mind and not in a good way. If Reinhard hadn't talked me out of it, I would have knocked you sprawling!

"It is greatly reassuring to find you in good health, my lord," Julius said.

"Yes, thank you very much for checking up on me," Subaru drawled. "I hope that you won't have any trouble finding your way home. Also, you can skip the 'lord' stuff, Jules. I'm pretty sure that any lordship I ever had is void at this point."

"I wouldn't be privy to those kind of decisions, my lord," Julius responded. "My dear friend Reinhard, as well as Miss Felt, are extremely worried about you traveling in the company of a witch. I was sent to investigate charges of witchcraft levied against her in this area. It was my great good fortune that I ran into you. I truly had no expectation of locating you but by chance and fate I stumbled over you while waiting for Aldebaran to finish making a followup report to the capitol via the communication system."

Could my luck possibly get any worse?!

"So what are your intentions, Jules?" Subaru asked in an overtly bored tone as he looked over the thirty guards in the park. The formerly marching guards had stopped in their tracks and they all stood there looking stunned and frightened at Subaru. "If you're going to ask me for a place to spend the night, I wish you'd brought fewer folks with you. If you were hoping to take me away, you'd need a lot more."

Julius frowned. "I am bidden to return you to the capitol, my lord. And to do justice upon the witch," Julius said firmly.

"Well, I'm deeply sorry about the state of your mission, Jules, because you're going to fail in both of those objectives," Subaru said.

Julius paused. "I've been told that you have been enchanted to believe yourself to be in love with the witch. I will do you the courtesy of accepting your emotions at face value. Therefore, I doubt that this impasse can be settled with words."

"So I assume that means we're about to fight," Subaru grumbled, grabbing the hilt of Anri's rapier.

Subaru quickly touched the reliquaries. *Shit! Anri didn't give me the lightning stones! Isn't that just my luck?!*

Julius nodded. "Yes, but I would prefer if this remained a duel between gentlemen."

"Meaning what?"

"These city guards are innocent of any aspect of the dispute between us. I'd like your assurance that you will keep them out of the fight."

Subaru blinked. *Well. That's a statement I never thought that I'd hear from a noble. I think I could actually learn to like Julius... if he hadn't been slobbering all over Emilia... and if he now wasn't threatening to kill her...*

Yeah, this is never going to be a guy that I'll like.

"I have no quarrel with them. As long as they stay out of the fight, they have nothing to fear from me," Subaru said.

"Splendid," Julius said, drawing his elegant longsword.

Subaru drew Anri's rapier.

Subaru held his rapier at the ready. Julius seemed completely relaxed.

"I just have to ask, Jules: How do you think that this fight is going to work?" Subaru asked in a bored tone. "I've killed trolls with my bare hands. You've seen me shrug off magical sword blows without any effort and you are... much more *breakable* than that. I don't really grasp what you're thinking in picking a fight with me."

Julius seemed completely calm. "I have heard quite a bit about your extraordinary exploits. I am aware that you are a considerable warrior and, at the very least, my equal in combat. To simply engage you in a sword fight would be folly."

"Yeah. That was kind of my point."

Julius gave him a patronizing smile. "Please, have no concerns. I have a better grasp of strategy than that, my lord. I spoke with Reinhard about you extensively before departing on this mission. You may have incredible power in melee combat but you have no ranged abilities. In contrast, I have plenty of options for attacking at distance thanks to my loving spirits," Julius held out his hand and Subaru saw six tiny balls of light, each about the size of a marble, spinning in a circle in his palm.

"All I need do," Julius continued. "Is use my magic to wear you down while remaining at range where you can not retaliate. Victory shall inevitably be mine."

Fuck! I completely forgot about Julius's spirits! How the hell can I compete with that?! He has attack magic and he can use spirits to grant him superhuman strength and agility. And his powers don't have a five second time limit which doesn't even matter because I have no way to close the distance to him! What the fuck can I do?! I don't have any attack magic or any way to attack a spirit at all!

Subaru's eyes widened. *Wait a second. The Spirits always seem to react when I-*

"I truly regret having to do this, Lord Subaru," Julius said as the spirits that now surrounded his wrist like a spinning bracelet began to whirl faster. "*Fell Goa!*"

"*Pridebreaker!*" Subaru roared in reply as he pointed at Julius.

Julius staggered back a step, clutching his head. "What- What did you do?!" He demanded.

The spirits whirling around Julius's wrist broke formation and flew away from him. Julius's face contorted in horror as the six tiny balls of light entered an orbit around Subaru's head. Subaru suddenly heard six new voices in his mind, all proclaiming their undying love for him.

Yes! I knew there was a reason that the lesser spirits always ran away when I used this trick! Julius's spirits may not be the products of witchcraft but they're still products of magic and that means that Pridebreaker can control them! Awesome!

The bad news is that binding spirits to me feels very different than binding mabeasts. When I used Pridebreaker on the mabeasts, it somehow locked them to me even after I stopped using my Authority. These spirits feel different. Like... Like I need to keep channeling Pridebreaker rather than just casting a spell and letting it go. I think that if I stop channeling, the spirits will break free and go back to Julius.

Well, that's not a big deal. Now it's my turn to use some spirit magic! Hey, spirits! Hit Julius with that 'Fell Goa' thing!

The spirits didn't respond, simply floating in a circle around Subaru's head and chanting their adoration for him.

Huh? Why isn't this working? Subaru's eyes widened. Oh fuck! Is it my contract with Beatrice? It prevents me from making contracts with other spirits and maybe that means I can't even use their magic with Pridebreaker? Or maybe Pridebreaker doesn't let me use spirit magic? Or maybe I just don't know how to use it?

Oh great! I took the spirits away from Julius but I can't use them! They're making me a very nice glowing crown and that's the extent of their usefulness!

Oh well. I denied them to Julius. That's something. Now he's just a normal man.

A normal man with decades of experience at sword fighting facing a guy with a couple of children's kendo classes under his belt...

OK but at least I have Indomitable!

...Wait... I... I don't know how I know this but I DON'T have Indomitable right now! I can't use it while I'm channeling Pridebreaker! If I want to use Indomitable then I'd have to let the spirits go!

But that puts me right back where I started because Julius can attack me at range with his spirits and I have no way to respond. Even worse, Pridebreaker's cooldown takes hours! If I let the spirits go to use Indomitable, I can't take them back!

"What have you done?!" Julius demanded, enraged.

Bluffing time! Subaru shrugged. "Well nothing personal, Jules, but since you said that using magic was inbounds for this fight, I thought that I'd show you a little bit of mine. Your world has granted me complete agency over its magic. You attempted to use your spirits against me and now they belong to me."

"You fiend!" Julius roared. All semblance of his normal composure had vanished. His face was pale and tears streamed from his eyes. "How dare you brainwash those innocent spirits into your bondage?!"

Subaru shook his head. "If you don't like what happened, Jules, just remember that you brought these spirits into a one on one fight yourself."

These spirits are actually kind of annoying. Honestly, it's like being surrounded by six preschoolers who are just constantly begging you to play with them. Their thoughts are all... childlike. Their minds are full of first impressions with barely any concept of past or future. It's like having six babies' minds sharing my own. These spirits don't have a fraction of the emotional maturity or intelligence that Puck and Beatrice possess.

Less emotionally mature than Puck... now that's really saying something.

Jules charged forward swinging his sword.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Hm. According to what you've read, sword play is mostly about skill and wits. Technique matters more than brute force and muscle. That's encouraging because, short of using Indomitable, it appears to be clear that Julius is far stronger than you. His sword is also heavier and if you're not careful he will simply brush your slender rapier aside.

You need to use leverage to your advantage. Use Reason and Judgment to plan your sword stroke with care. Parry his sword so that his sword tip is almost touching the hilt of your rapier. That gives you all the leverage and his heavier sword should be a disadvantage as its weight will make it harder to push back against your rapier.

Try to hold your own as best you can using Reason and Judgment to measure each stroke and aim your parries with precision. Think carefully before each stroke. Remember, Julius will absolutely capture you and then try to kill Emilia if you lose this fight.

Subaru restarted time.

Julius stepped forward swinging a quick strike, slicing just above Subaru's shoulder.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

He's aiming for your throat. Does he assume that this won't kill you or is he angry enough to really want you dead now?

Irrelevant.

Strike your rapier right there against the tip of his blade. Block his strike with the part of your blade just above the cross guard and then push his sword back. Make sure that your sword is on top of his when they push against each other. The leverage is all on your side then.

Subaru restarted time and quickly struck Julius's sword at the very tip. Subaru pushed the knight's sword away.

Huh. Actually, holding Julius's sword back is pretty easy as long as I put pressure in the right place. His swing stopped cold. It's not even really a block. I thought the blades would lock and I'd need to push him back but his sword practically bounced off mine.

Julius feels like he's falling back. That's promising. Maybe this won't be as hard as I thought.

Subaru stopped time with *Reason and Judgment*.

Don't be foolish. Julius isn't retreating, he's attacking. He's clearly surprised by how well you deflected his sword but he's not at a loss. He's trying to bring his sword down under your guard and slash your stomach.

Use the same technique. Block his sword tip with the base of your blade and take the initiative away from him.

Subaru restarted time and caught the next stroke on his blade and knocked the sword away.

Julius yielded a step backwards and retaliated with a strike from the other direction.

Subaru slipped into *Reason and Judgment* to aim and measure his sword stroke. Then he slid out of the frozen moment, parrying Julius again. This time Subaru tried to lift his rapier off Julius's blade and go for a quick slice to Julius's shoulder. Julius managed to avoid it but he again gave ground.

Julius raised his sword over his shoulder with both hands and held it out almost horizontally, pointing at Subaru. He stood his ground and waited.

What the hell is he doing? He looks horribly off balance and how does he plan to attack me like this?

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

It's a defensive stance. Look at his feet. His weight is almost entirely on his back foot. He's goading you to take a swing at his sword. When you do, he'll use the rotational energy you provided to retaliate against you with a slice at your neck.

The obvious strategy to counter this appears to be: Don't strike his sword. His sword being extended so far in front of his body limits its maneuverability and it's only protecting the upper half of his body. Feint toward the blade then throw a cut at the knee on his other side. He won't be able to move the sword fast enough to defend. He'll have to fall back.

Subaru restarted time and threw a light cut toward Julius's blade. Julius smirked as Subaru appeared to take his bait. Julius's smile faltered and his eyes widened as Subaru's sword missed striking his own blade by millimeters and slashed down toward the knight's exposed legs.

Julius drew back but he swung his sword at the same time, sending an awkward slash toward Subaru's neck.

Subaru froze time.

You're lucky that Julius is off balance. Had he a bit more leverage that blade would have slashed open your throat. Luckily, your rapier can move much faster than his heavy longsword. Strike the tip with your blade and knock it away.

Subaru restarted time and contemptuously slapped Julius's blade away.

Julius snarled at Subaru, his normally calm and composed face twisted with frustration and fury.

Huh. At least he looks as annoyed as I feel!

This dance continued for several minutes with Julius, despite his long years training with a blade, being held at bay by Subaru. Subaru kept slipping into *Reason and Judgment*, planning each cut with precision. Subaru could tell that his own technique was laughably clumsy but he managed to knock Julius's blade away each time and prevent the knight from slipping under his guard.

This is NOT fun! This doesn't even come close to being a fair fight! I have absolutely no chance of landing a strike against Julius without taking one in return! All I can do is keep pushing his sword back but Julius knows tricks to keep slipping by me so that every parry is an act of desperation! I'm the only one at risk here! I don't dare go on the offense so Julius doesn't have to do anything but Attack, Attack, Attack!

I need to shift this. I need to make Julius get nervous enough to start fighting more defensively or I'll just be dancing here until he gets lucky!

God, I hate fighting without Indomitable!

After the next parry, Subaru raised a fast cut toward Julius's neck.

Julius stepped back again but this time the knight tripped over something and stumbled. Subaru eagerly pursued. Julius recovered instantly and swung his great sword down directly above Subaru's head.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Well, isn't this just perfect. You blundered into an obvious feint like a complete novice which, in all fairness, is exactly what you are. It is actually rather impressive you've lasted this long against Julius but that overhead strike can not be blocked. You don't have enough time to parry and divert it. At best he's going to cut into your shoulder badly and likely shatter your collar bone. That alone might be enough to put you into shock although it's not a killing stroke.

Luckily, Julius's frustration has made him sloppy as well. He's badly off balance and overextended. You can get under his guard.

Subaru restarted time and leaped forward.

Julius's eyes widened in surprise as Subaru leaped toward to him. As a result, Julius had completely mis-aimed his stroke. Julius's hand and hilt connected with Subaru's shoulder with stunning force but his heavy sword hit nothing but air. Before Julius could recover, Subaru had the tip of his rapier at his throat.

Julius scowled at Subaru but he dropped his sword and raised his hands in surrender.

"You lose," Subaru said bluntly. "You are no match for me. If you value your life and the lives of these guards you will depart and trouble me no more."

Julius slowly nodded. "I will do as you command," He growled through clenched teeth. "I am unable to best you and... I thank you for your mercy, Subaru Natsuki. Both for me and for these men."

Subaru started to turn away. Then he hesitated. He looked at Julius and saw the tears streaming down his face.

Subaru took a deep breath and then make a quick decision.

"Here," He said to Julius. He canceled Pridebreaker. The six spirits were released from Subaru's control and immediately flew back to Julius.

The knight looked up at Subaru in shocked gratitude that rapidly hardened into suspicious. "Why?"

Subaru shrugged. "I have also been deprived of my spirit partner. We shared a special bond that was one of the most profound of my life. I remember the pain and the heartache of the moment when we were separated. I choose not to impose that pain on another."

Julius gave Subaru a confused frown.

I might regret giving the spirits back to him at some point but I'm pretty sure that if I stole Julius's spirits from him, I'd regret that decision immediately. Someone who's never bonded with a spirit can't imagine the pain of being separated from them.

Besides, there's also the distinct possibility of Beatrice accusing me of two-timing her. Yeah, definitely want to avoid that!

Julius gave a formal bow but he never took his eyes off Subaru. Subaru thought that he might even have seen a glimmer of respect in his hard eyes.

Subaru quickly climbed up onto Patrasche. He scowled down at Julius and the assembled guards. "Listen. I don't care what you guys do," He snapped to all the men, "But don't you dare try to follow me. I won't be so nice the next time around!"

"Halt!" A voice thundered.

Subaru looked up to see a group of more than a hundred guards marching quickly into the park. At their head was an ancient man with a smooth bald head and several ugly scars across his face. His expression was a seething scowl.

Fuck. General Brendig! He's the Governor of Ganaks. Even at cocktail parties he had a take-no-prisoners philosophy! One of the soldiers must have gone for help while I was fighting Julius! What the hell is wrong with me? Why didn't I assume that would happen? Because I thought this was like a video game and the world would hit the pause button while Julius and I were dueling? Fuck me!

"Kill the witch!" He roared. "Loose arrows!"

Subaru nudged Patrasche and the riding dragon took off like lightning.

Hey! When the fuck did I become 'the witch?!' I mean, I am but Brendig can't possibly know that! He's just labeling me that way. What an asshole!

Subaru raced off through Hightown and behind him he heard alarm bells sounding throughout the city.

Willard Pickett and Lord Zyst had rushed to the castle that evening on Grand Duke's Montefort's request. The entire city was in an uproar. Outside the castle, slum dwellers, peasants, and demi-humans had all gathered together in protest, chanting their support for Subaru Natsuki and their contempt for the sages' council. Willard and Zyst's carriages had fought their way through the crowds with difficulty.

They found Montefort casually seated on a stairway not far from the great council chamber, calmly eating nuts out of a bowl with a glass of wine beside him.

"What... is the emergency?" Willard asked, gasping for breath. He leaned on his cane while looking longingly at the stairs where Montefort sat. Sadly, Willard knew too well that if he sat down, he would be unable to get back up unassisted.

"I assume you came through part of it," Montefort replied.

"What are all those people doing out there?" Zyst asked.

"They are an enormous crowd of people from the slums and the surrounding communities here to protest the actions of the sages' council and they are the result of a masterful political move by our opponent versus a series of major fumbles on the part of our allies," Montefort explained.

"What do you mean?"

Montefort sighed. "It all started when Lady Crusch attempted to present her report to the sages' council the other day. I believe I informed you of her intent, did I not?"

The two men nodded.

"Well, I discovered that, following the ostensible Witch of Envy's miraculous escape from the Sword Saint, the sages' council became rather more concerned about Subaru Natsuki's witch than I had expected. Aghart, who possesses a legendary hatred for demi-humans in general and witches in particular, went so far as to wonder if Subaru is working with the witch willingly. Choi also suggested the idea had merit."

The two men just stared at Montefort who continued eating his nuts. Montefort's statement was so bizarre that they both attempted to parse it multiple times looking for some semblance of sense.

"I assume that the other sages laughed at them?" Willard asked.

"Oh no. The other sages were furious. Still, with only those two pushing for an investigation, I assumed that the matter was settled then and there. Unfortunately, Miklotov McMahon choose that moment to add *another* serious blunder to this mess."

"What did he do?" Zyst asked.

"He decided that, even though these allegations of Subaru willingly cooperating with the witch or indeed, the elf being a witch at all were unsubstantiated, they merited an investigation by the sages' council just to be sure," Montefort continued.

Willard made an incredulous face. "Why would he do that?"

"He probably wanted to reassert the sages' council's independence," Zyst mused. "A strong new king is likely to reduce the privileges and authority of the sages' council and the royal assembly significantly. McMahon probably wanted to find a way to remind Subaru Natsuki that the council could still check him if it so chose."

"Very good," Montefort raised his glass in salute before drinking from it. "That was indeed McMahon's plan. Clumsy but effective. With no evidence, the investigation would drag on for a few days and then be dismissed. Unfortunately, Subaru's dust rat decided to take McMahon's fumble and run with the ball."

"How?" Zyst asked.

"She spread word around the city that the sages' council were investigating Subaru Natsuki on charges of witchcraft even though the sages themselves had made the mistake of admitting on the record that there was no evidence. The slum dwellers reacted in a very predictable way. They are outside protesting their preferred candidate being railroaded without cause by the 'wicked nobles' who conspire against him. I never imagined the kind of support that Subaru Natsuki could command among the lower classes. I was blind to the depths of his appeal."

Willard and Zyst both looked at each other in deepening fear.

Montefort drained his wine glass. "We are in a crisis, gentlemen. I really must apologize for previously recommending a wait and see position. Events have spiraled out of control and we must take action. Immediately."

Willard nodded. "What about the sages' council's investigation?"

Zyst's face screwed up in thought. "McMahon has no stomach for this kind of heat from the public. He must be planning to cancel the investigation first thing in the morning."

"Indeed he is. McMahon doesn't want this kind of strife in the capitol and at the end of the day, he really doesn't care who sits on the throne," Montefort said. He shook his head. "I suppose age catches up to us all. McMahon would never have made this kind of blunder ten years ago."

"Then we need to immediately come up with something better to stick onto Subaru Natsuki than the cry of 'witch,'" Willard grumbled.

"Sadly, that is no longer possible," Montefort said, standing up. He shrugged. "The die has been cast, gentlemen. Will we or nill we, we are all in now."

Zyst and Willard looked at each other in confusion. "Meaning what?" Willard asked.

"Let's say that we do come up with some credible scandal to pin on Subaru Natsuki in a few months. After McMahon dismissed the last investigation with prejudice, do you really believe anyone will think that we are acting in good faith? Another investigation will just play into the narrative that we are the manipulative noble conspiracy that everyone claims us to be."

Zyst frowned. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that, like it or not, an accusation of associating with witches and practicing witchcraft is our only option now so we had better make sure that this sticks."

"What are you talking about, Montefort?" Willard asked in confusion. "Between the three of us we control a commanding number of members of the royal assembly. We can manage anything we want!"

Montefort gave Willard a patient look. "Willard, our allies will stick their necks out if we demand it but they won't place them on a chopping block for us, no matter what we threaten or how sweetly we ask. Next time we start an investigation into Subaru Natsuki, the ensuing riot will make what's happening outside tonight look like a children's play date. The members of the royal assembly will measure the risks and decide it's far safer having *us* angry at them than to have every peasant in the kingdom hunting them down, not to mention infuriating the man very likely to sit on

the throne, even if it takes a civil war to get him there."

"So what do you suggest?" Zyst asked.

Montefort shrugged. "We play the hand that we are dealt. Come tomorrow morning, Subaru Natsuki must be *persona non grata* in the eyes of the kingdom and of the law. I hope no one was planning to sleep tonight, we have a great deal to do."

"What about the protesters?" Willard asked.

"I've arranged for them all to be detained on charges of sedition. They will be arrested shortly."

The capitol was rolling with fury tonight. Huge crowds from the slums and beyond had shown up at the castle to protest their champion being investigated for witchcraft despite no evidence being provided in support of these charges.

Rom stood near the front of the crowd where Felt and Garfiel had managed to erect a crude stage. Felt and Garfield stood on the platform and they were riling up the crowd.

"The nobles want to go back to 'business as usual,'" Felt shouted to the massive crowd. "Put a new King on the throne and get things back to normal. But normal never worked for us!"

"Yeah!" a few people cheered.

"You know where I come from. I grew up in the slums. I never met my parents. If not for Lord Subaru, I'd be a sneak thief right now. And I'd probably be selling my body for every other meal! But Lord Subaru gave me a chance. He knew that there are people stuck in poverty in this kingdom, not because they deserve it but because there are serious forces making sure that once you wind up in the slums, that's where you stay! He paid me and my Grandfather to go around finding out how people got down here. He wanted real numbers and real stories because that's how you devise a real solution! Subaru Natsuki is committed to emptying the slums and giving us all the lives and respect we deserve!"

The crowd cheered.

"But change never comes free! The nobles are feeling the heat right now! They know that when the selection ends, Subaru Natsuki will *be* their King. They will do anything to prevent that from happening. They're accusing Lord Subaru of witchcraft! The man who protected Arlem from Gusteko soldiers. The man who hunted down the Whale. The man who killed two Sin Archbishops with his bare hands. And they're calling him a witch?! They even admitted publicly that they have *no* evidence! None! How stupid do they think we are? There's a reason they're using such transparent lies! They're scared! They know that they've got nothing! They know that if they don't stop him now it's going to be too late. But I have news for them! It's already too late!

"We all know who the rightful King is and we're not going to let them railroad him! It's time for a new era for our kingdom! A Lagunica for everyone, not just for the nobility! A Lagunica where everyone is given the chance to prove themselves. A Lagunica that believes in all of our potential!"

The crowd cheered and applauded.

Rom nodded, looking impressed. *Heh. That's my Felt.*

Felt stepped back and gestured Garfiel to come forward. The boy looked awkward but he gamely walked to the front of the stage.

"Hey. You all *don't* know me. My name is Garf. I come from the Sanctuary. I'd be dead right now, and so would all of my friends and neighbors, if Lord Subaru hadn't rescued us. The Witch Cult destroyed my home but we all got out safely and I got to help Subaru Natsuki kill a Sin Archbishop before we made our escape."

The crowd applauded and cheered wildly. Garfiel flushed at this approval. He looked at Felt nervously and she gave him a proud grin.

Garfiel cleared his throat. "You all can probably tell that I'm a demi-human," Garfiel said, flashing his sharp teeth with an ironic smile. "Never thought much about it, to be honest. The Sanctuary was mostly demi-humans. A few humans too, I guess, but so what? What's the big deal? We all bleed the same color right? We all eat the same food! I'm a demi-human. So *fucking* what?!"

The crowd applauded.

"I never really thought about what it mean to *be* a demi-human. Not until I left the Sanctuary. And as soon as I came to the capitol I discovered that, guess what, it really *does* matter! You know what I've heard since I got here? 'Stupid mutt!'"

The crowd roared in protest.

"'Didn't you see the sign? No pets allowed!'"

They all shouted again.

"'Get the fuck off my property or you'll wind up like all the other animals I hunt!'"

The crowd roared and cursed.

"Now we got a lot of humans here tonight. Humans who also believe that Lord Subaru is going to make their lives better. And maybe they think that what's going on with demi-humans isn't their problem? Well, buddy, you better think again. Because the nobility? The power brokers in this kingdom? They view us *all* as trash and it's no better being the trash on top of the heap than being the trash stuck on the bottom!"

The crowd applauded.

"But that's the way they want it! They want us to keep ripping each other apart while they kick back and watch. They throw us a scrap and we fight over it! No more, you hear me?! It's a brand new world! Cause their table is piled high with food and from now on, that's where our share comes from!"

The crowd cheered.

Rom looked around and frowned. He saw the the royal guard moving into position, surrounding the crowd.

He knew what that meant.

He made a sharp beckoning gesture toward Felt. She moved over to Rom with a frown.

Garfiel had finished his impromptu speech and was following Felt over to Rom when a stranger jumped onto the stage. He had wild eyes and a lunatic grin under a blond mod haircut that looked as though he had cut it with a dull knife. Small, curly ram's horns peaked through his hair

"Rejoice new believers! A new era is come!" The man cheered, holding both hands over his head. In one hand he held a glowing blue crystal, in the other was a glowing red crystal.

The young people in the crowd looked confused while their elders stared at the man in terror and then stampeded away. The young quickly followed them though they had no idea what was going on.

Rom gaped at the man for a moment then grabbed Felt in one enormous hand. He reached out and yanked Garfiel down off the stage.

"Run!" He barked at Garfiel as he turned and fled.

He heard Garfiel racing behind him.

"Gramps!" Felt shouted in protest as Rom carried her tucked under one arm. "What the fuck is going on?!"

"I know those crystals!" Rom shouted as they ran past all the royal guards who didn't react to them. The guards may have planned to arrest the crowd but they clearly recognized that they had much bigger problems right now. "They're used by the the Demi-human Alliance. They explode!"

Rom, Felt, and Garfiel fled the scene as fast as they could.

The alarm bells were ringing in the castle and the royal guard leapt into action. They raced to surround the man with their weapons drawn.

The man's lunatic grin never wavered.

"Surrender now or you *will* die!" The lead knight commanded in a great voice.

The man just laughed. "My life is meaningless! I am here to protect the new believers! Fear not, people of the world for I come with joyous tidings! The King will return!"

"What are you babbling about?" The knight demanded.

"What was will be, what is will be no more!" The man shouted. He seemed to be announcing this to the heavens rather than speaking to anyone actually present.

Another man leaped up onto the stage, his expression was furious. Several other people climbed up behind him. "Marcos! What are you doing?! This wasn't the plan! You were supposed to wait for the guards to get in range and then blow *everyone* up! Not scare the civilians away! What the hell were you thinking?! Lady Capella will be furious!"

Marcos kept laughing. "My instructions come from a higher authority, foolish Victor! I do only as my Goddess commands!"

"What?!" Victor asked incredulously.

"She must have him! She must have *all* of him! All that there is, for her need is very great!" Marcos cried out in religious ecstasy.

Victor scowled at Marcos. "Traitor! Peteleguese's Fingers are just as crazy as their master! Lady Capella should have strung you all on barb-wire when Petelguese rebelled! Kill this fool! Kill- Urk!"

One of the people who stood behind Victor, a cockeyed girl with short blond hair that stuck out in all directions like straw and leopard spots down her neck, had plunged a knife full into Victor's back without batting an eye. "*You* are a fool. You serve degenerate pretenders to a glorious legacy beyond your understanding," She said, dismissively to Victor as he gasped and fell to the ground in front of her, desperately trying to reach the knife embedded in his back. She turned her gaze toward Marcos. "And you are mad! You bow before a *fake*! Or hasn't the Gospel enlightened you to that

point?"

Another of Victor's companions, a massive man with bull horns turned on the girl. He drew a long cruel dagger and the pair began to fight.

The royal guards looked at one another helplessly, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

Marcos just kept laughing. "All glory unto the rightful ruler of this world: The Child of the Unconquered Sun! The Empyrean King!"

"Guard!" The commander hissed at a royal guard armed with a crossbow. He gestured toward the cultist and the archer quickly nodded, taking aim.

"Praise the Sun!" Marcos screamed in ecstasy as he brought both crystals high over his head and smashed them violently together.

A great crater appeared in the earth.

That night, Emilia and Anri sat beside the ruined farmhouse in silence.

Anri had tried to tempt Emilia into conversation to distract her but Emilia was fixated on Subaru's absence.

Anri had spent the last hour or two in the woods.

She finally came back, looking tired.

"What were you doing back there?" Emilia asked in an incurious voice.

Anri chuckled. "Setting traps. Just in case we need to get out of here in a hurry. It's something that Vera... worked hard to teach me," Anri sighed, her face growing morose.

Before Emilia could respond, the pair heard alarm bells peeling far off in the distance. They looked up and saw the portcullis of the great gate of Ganaks slam to the ground like rusty iron teeth.

Emilia's heart stopped. "Subaru," She whispered.

"Hey, we don't *know* that this has anything to do with him," Anri said weakly.

Emilia looked at her incredulously.

Anri flushed and nodded shamefaced. "Just... wishful thinking."

Emilia bit her lip and stood up. "I'm going to go in after him," She said.

"How?" Anri asked incredulously. "There's only one gate and it's a walled city. You'll never get inside!"

"I have an idea," Emilia said slowly. "I'm going to try to rescue Subaru."

"Alright, as long as you have a plan, I'm game," Anri said standing up. "Let's go."

"No," Emilia shook her head. "Just me."

"He's my friend too!" Anri protested.

"That has nothing to do with this, Anri. I'm not even sure if *I* can get into the city this way. But two of us are going to get caught for sure," Emilia said. "Wait here until sunset tomorrow."

"And then what?!" Anri demanded.

Emilia looked at Anri in misery. "I don't know, Anri," Emilia said in a broken voice. "I don't have Subaru's gift for planning. I wish I did. I wish I could tell you what to do if things go wrong. But if we're not back by sunset then we're probably not coming back at all and you'll need to think about how to help your people without us."

Anri's face paled but she nodded.

"Anri-" Emilia began.

"I'm not saying 'goodbye,'" Anri said firmly. "You two will get out of that damn city just like you've gotten out of every ridiculous trap and ambush since the day I met you. I'll see you here by tomorrow night. Hey, if you're going into town, see if you can bring me some hot food while you're at it. Dinner consisting of nothing but raw vegetables is getting pretty stale."

Emilia smiled at Anri and took off running into the night. *I really wish that I had a plan!* She thought.

Anri had a look of dread on her face as she watched Emilia leave.

She reached into her bag and rummaged around inside, finally pulling out a small, black book.

She began to frantically flip through the pages.

***Chapter 21*: Chapter 21**

Subaru and Patrasche hid in an alley in Lowtown. So far they seemed to have avoided detection.

After Subaru had fed and watered her, Patrasche had laid down in the alley and Subaru leaned back against her flank.

Man, this 'Lowtown' place is the pits. Hell, this place is a pit. I'm not even sure where the Ganaks mine stops and the neighborhood begins. It looks like half the people down here live in abandoned mine shafts. The whole area is just a dug out bowl with some shafts cut deeper into the rock.

I thought that the place Felt and Rom lived was obscene but this place puts it to shame. The air is stale, no sign of clean water, and barely even any sunlight because we're half underground!

I can hear that the city is still in an uproar. They're searching Hightown and Midtown. Funny but it may not initially occur to them that I'm even hiding down here. After all, what human would willingly descend into a demi-human slum?

How the hell am I going to get out of here?

I might be able to just hide here and wait them out. Ganaks is a huge city with a thriving economy. They can't seal the gate for more than a couple of hours before the locals start screaming in protest. They might last a day of checking everyone leaving the gate but that will just stretch out the wait time and the locals will be screaming again.

It'll be business as usual in two days and then I can probably just ride out through the front gate. Even if they spot me, once I'm outside the city, they'll never catch up.

"What do you think, girl?" Subaru asked. "Do you think we can hide out for two days in a city of a hundred thousand people? Should be easy right?"

Patrasche gave a low, mewling cry.

Subaru shook his head. *Yeah, who am I fooling? Brendig is likely to force his guards to search day and night until they burn me out. I need to find another way out of the city.*

"Well, there's always a way in or out of a city," Subaru mused to himself. "If you're really serious about it. Maybe a sewage aqueduct?"

Patrasche shivered.

"I know," Subaru said. "That wouldn't be my preference either but we are desperate."

Patrasche licked his forehead.

"Thanks," Subaru smiled. "I guess our only option right now is to try to get to that restaurant Victoire told us about and try to contact Mikael. He might be able to get us out of the city. Hightown is a swarm with soldiers right now but we don't have much choice. At least Miss Lilian's seems to be at the edge of Hightown so we might have more luck sneaking in. What do you think?"

Subaru looked at Patrasche who responded with an ambiguous cluck.

Subaru and Patrasche didn't have much trouble getting into Midtown. Hightown was a completely different matter.

Hightown was awash with soldiers and they were all looking for Subaru and Patrasche.

This prompted Subaru to come up with an alternate strategy.

So he brought Patrasche back to Lowtown and left her someplace hidden.

Then Subaru... took off his hooded robe and put on his normal clothes and walked through Hightown with his head held high.

Subaru smiled in a friendly fashion to the guards as he passed by and received a smile in return.

That's what I thought. There are no pictures of me here for them to study so they've just been told to look for a hooded man on a black dragon. They can't tell who I am. As long as I don't bump into Julius or someone else who knows me by sight, I'm golden!

It's a risky plan but it's working so far.

Subaru located Miss Lilian's at the edge of Hightown. It was a small, homey building that appeared to still be open for business despite how late it was.

Subaru walked inside and quickly scanned the area.

Miss Lilian's was a small restaurant that gave off a vaguely Italian impression. It was filled with small tables and booths but they all appeared to be empty. A musician with a violin sat far in the back, playing a quiet melody.

Behind a counter, near the front of the restaurant, there was a well-dressed man with carefully groomed black hair who was wearing an apron. He took one look at Subaru and immediately turned his nose up.

What's his problem? I'm wearing my nice clothes for a change. I don't look like a penniless peasant. What's with the attitude?

Whatever the reason is, I get the funny impression that this man and I will not be friends.

"Can I help you, sir?" He said flatly.

"Yes. I'm looking for somebody. His name is Mikael," Subaru replied.

"I'm afraid that there is no such person among our guests tonight," The man said dismissively.

"He's not a guest. He's an employee," Subaru said, fighting for patience.

"We have no waiter of that name either," The man said, waving his hand as if to shoo Subaru away.

I'm starting to wonder if this man is even listening to me...

"He's not a waiter, he's a busboy," Subaru almost growled.

The man looked at him as if he was crazy. "Do you really think that I would know the name of a mere busboy?"

"Why not?" Subaru asked raising his voice. "Do you run this place or not?!"

The man scowled. "Please lower your voice, sir!" He snapped.

"Why?!" Subaru retorted. "The place is empty!"

"The restaurant has been completely rented out tonight by our most important client. I will be unable to entertain you further."

Subaru ground his teeth. "I need to talk to one of your employees."

"Sir, please leave right now before I am forced to call for the guard," The man snapped.

Subaru bared his teeth and tried to remind himself that an *Indomitable* punch was not a sensible response to this idiot. "Listen to me, you-"

"Hey! Subaru!"

Subaru whirled around and his jaw dropped.

Sitting a few booths back, wearing a napkin around his neck as a bib and sipping champagne out of a fluted wine glass, was Lye.

"Hey! I thought that was you!" Lye said with a smile. He raised his wine glass in a salute before taking a sip.

Subaru quickly raised his fists and fell into a defensive stance.

Lye's eyes widened and he put up his hands. "Hey, hey! No fighting in here! This is one of my favorite restaurants this side of the capitol!" Lye took another sip of the wine. He didn't so much drink it as he seemed to pour a little on his tongue and then inhale over it.

Subaru stood tensed for several moments but Lye didn't show any sign of aggression and Subaru slowly relaxed his defensive posture.

"So how have you been?" Lye asked Subaru, "That Sanctuary business was crazy, right?"

Subaru walked slowly up to Lye's table. He watched every move that the twisted little man with razor sharp teeth made.

"Master Lye," The man hurried up to the table. He was clearly terrified of Lye and it was obvious that now he was applying that same fear to Subaru. "Do you... know this man?"

Lye laughed. "Yeah, Pierre. We kind of work together. He's alright. Hey, why don't you join me for a minute, Subaru? I'm having a special meal tonight. Say, Pierre, what am I eating?"

"Oh an exquisite delicacy, Master Lye," Pierre said with a fawning demeanor. "Maurice is already hard at work preparing your entree," Pierre paused for dramatic emphasis, "*Escalopes de Veau à l'Estragon!*"

Lye squealed in delight. He bounced up and down in his seat while clapping his hands together. "Oh, fabulous day!" Lye said in rapture. He sipped a bit more wine and sopped up some olive oil spread on a plate with a bread roll. "Sit down, Subaru! Let's catch up!"

Subaru just stared at Lye with a scowl and Pierre swallowed hard. "Of course. I will fetch Master Subaru a menu immediately!"

Pierre hurried away.

"Hey!" Subaru grabbed him by the arm.

Maurice looked back at Subaru with raw terror on his face. Subaru gave him a steady look. "While you're back there, see if you have a Mikael on staff, OK?"

Maurice nodded fervently. "Yes, sir! Right away, sir!" He bolted for the kitchen as soon as Subaru let go.

Lye sipped his wine and then sighed in rapture. "I'm telling you, Subaru, there is no greater pleasure than to savor the exquisite balance of flavors in a good bottle of wine. Especially when it perfectly matches the entree."

Lye stared off into the distance with a dreamy look on his face. Finally, he ended his reverie and smiled up at Subaru. "So, what have you been up to?" Lye asked.

Subaru gave Lye a look of disbelief and then shook his head, "Lye, did I miss something here? Last time we met, we were trying to kill each other!"

Lye stared at him, "Are you *still* upset about that?" He asked incredulously. "What's the big deal? You got to keep the elf anyway!"

Subaru sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"Come on! The food here is too good for us to waste time squabbling. Sit down and take a load off! I wanted to talk to you anyway, Subaru. It's lucky that my Gospel sent me here tonight. I thought that it was just because of the new veal cutlets but this is a win-win," Lye replied.

Subaru slowly took a seat at Lye's booth. Subaru never took his eyes off the Sin Archbishop. *This is ridiculously dangerous but maybe I can get some information out of him. If it's true that the Archbishops put this curse on Emilia then maybe Lye can tell me how to undo it.*

Lye sipped some more wine and dipped some bread in what looked like a plate of olive oil. "So, I'm sensing that you're still kind of upset with me," Lye said matter-of-fact.

Subaru stared at him, unable to completely hide his fury. "You tried to kill me and to steal my fiancée!" Subaru reminded him.

Lye shrugged, "Well, my Gospel told me to! You would have done the same thing. Luckily, the Gospel changed its instructions and I don't have to waste my time thinking about the elf anymore."

"It changed its instructions?" Subaru repeated intently.

"Yeah. I guess the Gospel really *is* satisfied that she's with you or something," Lye took another drink. "So, what have *you* been up to this past week?"

Subaru grimaced at Lye and then sighed. "All of my friends turned on me, I'm wanted by two kingdoms, and my fiancée is cursed."

"Damn, Subaru," Lye said sympathetically. "That's a really rough string of luck."

"Tell me about it," Subaru muttered. *Am I really commiserating with a Sin Archbishop?!* "Say, Lye, I'm wondering if the curse on my fiancée might be something that the other Sin Archbishops did."

"A curse?" Lye asked in surprise. He shook his head. "Sorry, Subaru. That wasn't us."

"What do you mean?" Subaru asked sharply as he felt his only lead slipping away from him.

"None of the Archbishops have any facility with curses or that kind of magic. If somebody cursed your woman, it wasn't us."

Could he be lying?

Well, sure he could be. But what if he's not? What if I'm completely lost and I have no leads at all as to what happened to Emilia?

Lye suddenly chuckled and flashed Subaru a grin that showed off shark-like teeth, "Oh. Before I forget, I should probably tell you that Capella still wants to hunt you down and do a whole host of nasty things to you."

Subaru broke into a cold sweat. "She still wants Emilia?" Subaru asked.

"Nah. This is personal. She took those comments you made about her 'sucking you off,' pretty badly."

"Gee, thanks for telling her about them then," Subaru grumbled.

Lye laughed, "Are you kidding me?! For a second, I thought that she was going to burst! I've never seen her so angry and it wasn't even directed at me. It was awesome! Keep pissing off Capella and Regulus, Subaru, and I'll start taking you out for drinks!"

"Neat," Subaru muttered.

"Here, try some of this," Lye said, pouring a small amount of wine into Subaru's elaborately carved wine glasses. "This

is a special Vollachian vintage that I have shipped up here just for me."

Lye looked at Subaru. "Tell me what you think," He said intently.

I doubt that the wine is poisoned. Lye certainly seemed surprised by me showing up here. Maybe I can learn something if I can keep this conversation going.

Subaru sniffed it for a moment and then, as he'd seen Lye do, poured a little on his tongue and inhaled over it.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Hm. The flavor isn't unpleasant but it's still just rotten grapes and alcohol. You never were much of a wine drinker back home. All the same, you should come up with something laudable to say about this wine. If Lye has it shipped all this way, it's bound to be something that he loves dearly. You'll make more headway with him if you charm the freak a little bit. You might unlock all kinds of useful information about the Cult. Actually, hold that thought. Balance your review. Say two nice things about the wine and then find something to criticize. That's more in keeping with being a gourmet.

The wine's flavor is smooth, there's not much bite to it compared to the wines that your parents used to drink. The alcohol is also barely noticeable over the mix of fruits. Probably grapes with some apples mixed in? However, there is a strong wooden flavor that detracts. If you recall correctly, they age wine in wooden barrels. Perhaps this one was set down for just a little too long.

Subaru restarted time, "I think that this wine has a rich smooth taste, the different flavors are largely in balance and the apple tang is delightful. However, the amount of wood I can taste in the wine is a bit too strong. Maybe they aged it improperly," Subaru replied calmly.

"Exactly!" Lye cheered, "They were so close to a truly legendary wine and they *just* missed. It's such a tragedy. You spend years, maybe *decades* trying to make a truly exquisite wine and then to mess it up by mistiming the aging length?! It brings tears to my eyes!" Lye mourned.

Wow. He really means that. This little monster is looking at the wine as if it were a sick child. The more I learn about these Cultists the more freaky I find them. I guess Rem might have had a point in attacking first and asking questions second.

Pierre came out and handed Subaru a menu. "Master Subaru," Pierre said very formally. "I apologize but we have no one working at this restaurant this night or any other night by that name. It's possible he was a previous employee who departed. I'm sorry."

Subaru looked at the menu to hide his scowl. *Great work, Victoire. These 'Shadows' really have their act together.*

Or did he just get killed off like the other Shadows? Maybe I shouldn't tell Anri about this.

Actually, maybe I shouldn't tell Anri that I came here in general. News that I was greeted like an old friend by a Sin Archbishop and someone that I strongly suspect of being a cannibalistic serial killer is not a story that I want getting around.

After several seconds of staring at the menu, Subaru finally started to read it.

Man, this menu is small. I don't even know what half of this stuff is. Wait, 'Pasta Napolitan?' I think maybe I had that back home once. I'll just grab that.

"Can I get three orders of the Pasta Napolitan to go, please? I need to get moving soon," Subaru said, handing the menu back.

Pierre looked aghast at the notion of 'takeout' but he seemed too frightened of Lye to object and he was now clearly putting Subaru on the same pedestal. "Of course. I'll see that your dishes are prepared immediately, sir," Pierre walked away.

"Damn, Subaru. *Takeout*?!" Lye asked critically. "How can you miss out on dining here?! The decor, the music, the ambiance! There's a reason that this is one of my favorite restaurants and it's only about seventy percent about the food. Look," Lye put down his wine glass and tapped it gently. The glass hummed, "That's real crystal, you know!"

Subaru shrugged, "I suppose I never was much of a foodie," He admitted.

"Oh, I weep for you, Subaru!" Lye mourned, "There are so many exquisite pleasures in this world that you're completely insensitive to!"

"I guess to me it's less about what you eat than who you eat it with," Subaru replied.

"Heh. You sound just like my sister."

Subaru stared at him, "You have a sister too?"

Oh dear, my imagination is a frightening place to be right now...

"Yeah but I don't see her too much. I just try to keep Louise well fed," Lye took a sip of wine, "Speaking of family, I wanted to talk to you about Roy."

"I hope that you're not looking for an apology," Subaru grumbled.

"Nah. He was a big, fat sack of crap. You wouldn't believe the kinds of garbage he ate," Lye said, looking sick. "He'd eat anybody! It didn't matter their age, their skills, or their character. He ate everyone he came across."

Subaru squinted at him. "Not that I'm complaining but I am pretty surprised that you're taking this so well," Subaru replied.

"Please, I hate all of the the other Archbishops. Well, maybe not Louise," He admitted, "But honestly, Subaru, you're probably the closest thing among the Archbishops that I have to a friend."

Subaru was silent for a moment. "That's so very, very sad," Subaru muttered.

"Yeah," Lye admitted, "Anyway, I needed to talk to you about Roy. When you killed him you took a piece of him with you."

"Probably several pieces," Subaru admitted, "But I've bathed since then and I'm guessing that they're all gone."

"Cute," Lye grinned at him, "Nah, I meant his Authority."

Subaru stared at him, "What?"

"My Gospel says that you pocketed his Authority of Gluttony when you killed him. Don't ask me how, the Gospel flat out told me that you aren't compatible with it, and after that commentary about food, I've got to agree. Anyway, I think of the Authority as kind of a family possession so I'd like to have it back."

Subaru's mind whirled.

Wait. So I picked up a new Authority? I haven't noticed anything different. Then again, like Lye says, I doubt that I'd be compatible with Gluttony. Wait, could that be why... whatever happened at the slave camp, happened?

Subaru's eyes widened. Could that be why the mabeasts have responded to me? Ever since Roy died, they've been acting funny around me. I remember that Beatrice once told me that the mabeasts were a product of the Authority of Gluttony. Maybe that's why I can control some of them now?

Hang on a second. 'Pridebreaker.' Could that power have been unlocked because I acquired Roy's Authority? Would that mean that I can use Gluttony or is the extra Authority just making Pride stronger somehow? Or could it be completely unrelated?

Too many possibilities to sort through right now. That said, this might be useful in another way. I have something that Lye wants. That gives me leverage over him. I just need to decide how to best play this...

"For?" Subaru asked calmly.

"Huh?"

"An Authority is one of the ultimate powers in the world, Lye. I'm assuming you didn't really expect me to just hand it over without *some* kind of compensation."

Lye frowned and began to rub his chin.

Judging by how that question appears to have completely tripped him up, I think he did expect that. I'm guessing Lye and the others aren't really used to negotiating. They live in a world where the things you want are taken because the person who has it isn't strong enough to protect it.

Tough break, Lye. You can't take stuff from me by force.

"I could give you a copy of my map of all the best dining locations on the continent," Lye suggested.

Oh God...

"Sorry, Lye. That wouldn't really do it for me," Subaru sighed.

I'm not sure that I'd want to give him the Authority anyway. Instinct tells me that doing anything that could potentially make Lye stronger is a really bad idea. Not that I have the slightest idea of how I could give the Authority to him even if I wanted to. However, if I just say 'no' then I bet Lye will fight me or start actively pursuing me which is one more Archbishop on my tail that I don't need. I should encourage him to think that we can make a deal once he comes up with something to satisfy me.

Lye looked frustrated, "Well, what *do* you want for the Authority?"

"I'm just looking for equal value here, Lye," Subaru said calmly, "I'm willing to give you the Authority but only if you give me something that's just as good."

"That's hard!" Lye complained.

"Well, if you don't work for something you don't appreciate it," Subaru said conversationally. "We have a saying back home: 'Hunger is the best sauce.'"

"I hate hunger!" Lye shuddered, "It's horrible! It's my least favorite sensation to eat."

Yeah I bet... "But you have to admit that food tastes better if you've been waiting for it for a while," Subaru pointed out.

Lye frowned, "Alright. So I if I find you something that's as good as Roy's Authority, then you'll give it to me?"

"Sure," Subaru shrugged, "Like you said, I'm not compatible with it anyway."

OK, it sounds like Lye is prepared to go hunting for treasure or something rather than trying to lead any more Archbishops to hunt me down. That's good enough for now.

"Do you have any idea what Capella and Regulus are doing right now?" Subaru changed the subject.

"Regulus is probably sitting in his mansion and either being fawned over by all those girls that he's captured or he's abusing them," Lye sniffed. "It's pathetic."

"'Pathetic' does describe him well," Subaru agreed.

Also absolutely terrifying but why split hairs?

"Capella's gone off on some kind of secret mission. I don't know the details. She'll probably yank my leash when she needs some extra muscle." Lye made a gaging sound. "Frankly, I'm in heaven as long as she's out of contact. She's such a spiteful, narcissistic bitch! And she thinks that *everybody* is lusting after her body!"

Subaru frowned, remembering the skinny, flat-chested, barely teenage Capella.

Lye made a sound of disgust. "It's annoying as hell! Not to mention the way she runs me and the other assassins around. You know, she tortures me and the other assassins just for laughs? And the random hits she assigns? Some days I think she pulls target names out of a hat. Half the ones she sends me after aren't even worth killing."

"Because they're not bad people?"

"Huh? No! Who cares about that? When I use my power, I devour my target's memories and experiences. These fucks aren't worth killing because they don't have any useful skills or impressive experiences. I'm not Roy, Subaru! I have expectations of the people I eat!"

With every word that he says, Freaky gets more and more creepy. "I'm sure that they're all very sorry that their deaths didn't live up to your expectations," Subaru said.

"Well, I guess it's not *entirely* their fault," Lye replied seriously. "Capella is the one who picks the targets after all."

Freaky doesn't even hear sarcasm...

Subaru changed the subject, "Hm. I thought that I'd annoyed Capella enough to come looking for me personally," Subaru mused.

Don't get me wrong, I'm glad that she isn't but I'd like more information on what she's doing right now.

"Capella is lazy as hell," Lye grumbled. "She'd normally just sit in her lair, growling to herself and punishing everyone that she can get her hands on until someone finds you. I'm actually pretty curious what she's gone off chasing right now. It must be something serious to catch her attention. I mean, I'm not curious enough to go and *ask* her but still."

OK well, I still don't know where Capella is but it sounds like she's busy doing something that doesn't involve me. That's promising.

Lye sipped some more wine. "Anyway, before I forget, I'm really glad that I ran into you tonight because I got permission from someone to make you an offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"To take your seat in the Order."

"Huh?"

"The Archbishop of Pride," Lye explained.

Subaru frowned. "Hey, do the people here know who you really are?" Subaru asked.

If they know who Lye is, anyone who recognizes me could associate Subaru Natsuki with the Witch Cult. That would be really bad.

"Nah," Lye replied. "They just know that I'm scary and that I kill people," He chuckled. "*And* they know that if I don't like the entree I'll cut their balls off."

"And eat them?" Subaru asked with a sick look on his face.

"What?! No! That's disgusting, Subaru!" Lye shuddered. "Do you have any idea what human flesh tastes like?!"

"No. But I bet *you* do," Subaru deadpanned.

Lye nodded. "Yeah, guilty as charged. You know, I once spent a fortune bidding on a fabled cookbook said to date to the

days of the Old Kingdom. It was supposed to have recipes of such exquisite delicacy that it's heartbreaking! Some even included recipes for human flesh and blood."

Subaru stared at Lye in disbelief. "And... how did that work out?" He murmured, not certain he wanted to know.

"Disappointing," Lye sighed. "I can't act like the recipes weren't interesting but none of them lived up to the hype. I spent a full six months doing nothing but cooking after I bought that book."

"You can cook?!" Subaru asked in surprise.

"Naturally! I'm an accomplished gourmet, you know," Lye said proudly. "Sometimes I even compete in Epicurean contests!"

"No kidding," Subaru replied.

This conversation is nothing short of surreal. And what does Lye mean by 'human flesh tastes bad?' Isn't he constantly talking about eating people? I guess he just means devouring their memories and skills. That's a really weird power he has.

Lye wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Yeah. You know, someday I think I'd like to start my own cooking school," Lye said wistfully. He shook his head. "But anyway, what do you think about coming into the Cathedral?"

Subaru snorted. "What? And get double-teamed by Regulus *and* Capella? You must think that I'm an idiot!"

Lye shook his head. "It's a sincere offer. It's not a trap. The rules forbid us from fighting one another. That's a serious taboo. If you came in and took the oath, Regulus and Capella would have to back off."

Subaru frowned. "If Capella can't hurt you, why do you always act so afraid of her?"

Lye shuddered. "I said she can't kill me," He grumbled. "But you'd be surprised what you can live through..."

Subaru swallowed hard. "Should I even ask?"

Lye shook his head violently.

What did I expect?

Lye took another sip of wine as if to chase the bad memory away. "Capella is probably the biggest swinging dick in the Order. She can't *kill* the rest of us but she's really good at coming up with with creative punishments to convince us to do what she wants. That's how she keeps control of the Order."

Subaru frowned. "You mean she outranks Regulus?" he asked in surprise.

"Outranks? Nah. Every Archbishop is on the same level. Capella is just mostly the one who runs the Order because Regulus and the rest of us flat out doesn't care about managing it. Regulus and Capella tend to step around each other a little carefully when we meet up at the Cathedral. They usually avoid butting heads since their powers don't work all that well against each other."

Subaru scratched his chin. "You're saying that you're not allowed to kill the other Archbishops. But what about Petelguese? You and Regulus killed him."

"Yeah but that was after he had already rebelled against the Order. He refused to follow the Gospel's writ so the Gospel told us to hunt him down and kill him."

Subaru frowned. "Wait. Why did he rebel?"

Lye scratched his chin. "Um. Well, I'm not really sure. The Gospel apparently told him something about you that made him crazy. Petelguese was always pretty crazy but this was a new low even for him. Anyway, he went AWOL and decided to kill you to prove the Gospel's prediction was wrong. That's why the Gospel ordered us to kill him instead."

OK... That's interesting, if not particularly informative.

"Do you know what he read?"

"Nah," Lye said dismissively.

Subaru thought for a moment. "Wait. Didn't the Gospel tell the Archbishops to kill me at the Sanctuary?" Subaru asked.

Lye looked incredulous. "No! The Gospel told Petelguese in no uncertain terms to leave you alone but it also told him a ton of other stuff, stuff that he refused to accept so he ran off to kill you. Regulus's Gospel *also* told him to leave you alone but he was too dumb to figure out who you were at first."

"Roy told me that the Gospel had put me back on the 'kill' list," Subaru said intently.

Lye hesitated. "Well, no, not really. The Gospel told us to save you from Petelguese and then it stopped talking about you, for whatever reason. But it never explicitly told us *to* kill you either. That's the only reason that we're talking right now. If the Gospel told me to, I'd rip you apart. I don't know that your status ever really changed after the incident with Petelguese. I can't say for sure what Roy read. As far as I can tell, right now an Archbishop would only kill you for personal reasons."

That is in no way comforting...

Subaru made a face. "Why would I want to join the Witch Cult anyway?"

"The Order!" Lye shouted, sounding very offended.

"OK, fine. 'The Order.' Why would I want to join?"

Lye looked thoughtful and began to rub his chin.

Seriously? He didn't even have a pitch ready? Did Lye really just assume that I'd be thrilled to join up the moment he offered?

Lye finally shrugged. "Well, for one thing, the Gospels tell the Archbishops to work together pretty often to advance our individual goals so you'd have backup in pursuing your own objectives. And there's an iron clad rule against fighting each other as long we're all obeying the Gospels. Regulus and Capella would have to leave you alone."

I've got to admit, that might be worth a lot.

"What about my... pawns?" Subaru asked.

I doubt there's special rules for 'fiancees' and 'spirit partners.'

Lye nodded, sopping up some olive oil with a bread roll. "Yeah, we're not supposed to mess with each other's pawns either. It's not a rule but it's still good advice. If Capella slaughters your people, you'll turn around and do the same to hers and she really can't stop you because she can't face you directly."

Lye suddenly chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Subaru asked.

Lye sighed. "I'm just picturing Regulus's face if you slaughtered all of his wives."

OK, that's just... creepy on so many levels...

Would I really do this? I mean... I don't have a ton of options left. Could the Witch Cult help me cure Emilia?

If the thing with Anri doesn't work out then where do I go from there...

Subaru sighed. "Lye, I got to tell you, your personal assurance that this isn't a trap doesn't carry a ton of weight with me."

"Hey!" Lye said, looking hurt.

"What?!" Subaru asked incredulously. "We've spoken a grand total of three times in our lives! One of those times involves us trying to kill each other and the other time involved you kicking back and laughing while you watched Regulus try to kill me. How much trust do you think that earns?"

Lye thought about that and finally shrugged. "I guess that makes sense," He said reluctantly, "Still hurts though." Lye shook his head. "Anyway, check your Gospel, Subaru. You'll see that I'm on the level with you."

It always comes back to these Gospel things. Some instinct tells me that it would be a simply terrible idea to admit to Lye that I don't have one.

Subaru made a face. "I thought you said that Capella still wants to kill me?"

Lye laughed. "Nah! She wants to torture you for a couple of weeks!"

"Thanks for clarifying," Subaru said dryly.

"Capella's not under any obligation to leave you alone unless you come in and take your oath to follow the Gospel's writ so she's not *technically* breaking the rules," Lye explained, sipping his wine. "It's pretty nice that I found you. I was worried that the enchantment you're under would prevent me from locating you."

Subaru blinked. "Enchantment?"

"Yeah. I heard that you've been placed under some kind of weird enchantment. Apparently, it prevents witches from being able to locate you unless you go looking for them first. Or unless they have something to lock onto that would let them track you down. I figured the same enchantment would apply to me but I guess I don't qualify as a witch!" He chuckled.

Witches?! What the hell? Aren't all the Witches dead except for Envy who's supposed to be trapped? Who's out there that could even be affected by this spell?!

"Wait. Who put an enchantment on me?" Subaru asked.

"Beats me," Lye shrugged. "I mentioned this to Capella the last time that I saw her. I dunno why I decided to be nice to her. It's always a waste of time. She was really pleased when I told her. She claimed that the enchantment explained why she couldn't find you. Turns out that she's just a really shitty tracker. I can't wait to see her face when I tell her

that we talked," He snickered.

"How did you find out that I was enchanted?"

"Oh," Lye blanched and he suddenly looked uncomfortable. "I... really couldn't say..."

Subaru waited but Lye didn't say anything else. He just sipped his wine, looking nervous.

OK. Guess I'm not getting any more information on this subject...

What about his offer? Working with the Witch Cult?

I admit, it's an idea. As little as I like all these freaks, if the whole world really does turn against us, it might be our final refuge. A very final refuge. I don't want to have anything to do with these guys if I can help it.

"Lye, hypothetically, if I did want to meet up with the Order, how would I do it?"

Lye snickered and reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black book.

That must be the Gospel he keeps talking about.

Great...

"OK, Lye," Subaru said. "I promise that I'll think about it."

"Great!" Lye said enthusiastically. "I'd love to have someone at the Cathedral who doesn't make me want to puke!"

Subaru nodded. *Not sure how I should feel about Lye's apparent fondness for me...*

Subaru cleared his throat. "Hey, Lye, I wonder if you could help me out with something?"

"Sure! Always happy to help a brother in the Order!" He tittered.

I guess this is him trying to be enticing. Also, it's a complete lie from what he's told me about his interactions with the others.

"This city is all locked up and I'm trying to find a way out. Any ideas?"

Lye sipped his wine. "Sure! There's a route that me and Capella's assassins take all the time through the mines. Just follow the red hands."

"Follow the what?"

"There's a lot of graffiti on those old mine tunnels so the marks blend in pretty good. Look for a red hand symbol painted on the wall. The fingers point to the city. The wrist points outside. Just keep following the red hands and it'll lead you out into the country. It's one of the old tunnel entrances with all the warning sounds around it."

"Warning signs?" Subaru asked slowly.

Lye snickered. "The tunnel was abandoned because of firedamp. I wouldn't bring an open flame into that tunnel if I were you."

"Then how do I find my way through?"

"The red paint is enchanted. Glows in the dark. You'll find your way OK."

"Are the tunnels big enough for a riding dragon?" Subaru asked intently.

Lye thought for a minute then shrugged. "Probably."

Worth trying at least.

"I'll probably be heading out that way myself once I finish eating," Lye said. "I need to go meet up with Elsa."

"Elsa?" Subaru's stomach dropped.

"Elsa Granhiert," Lye said. "She's one of Capella's assassins and we were working on a job together. It went tits up at the last minute."

"What job?" Subaru asked slowly.

Lye reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and handed it to Subaru.

Subaru tried to smooth it out and read it. The boilerplate at the top was a thick opaque block of legalese and at the bottom were more than a dozen names, almost all of which had a line drawn through them. Subaru struggled to parse the text. His eyes bulged. "Lye, is this... an assassination contract?!"

Lye snorted. "I know, right? It's weird what Capella is a stickler about but she demands contracts from all of her customers!"

"You do assassinations for Capella?!"

Lye shrugged. "Hey, we all need to make a living. Capella gave Elsa and me the job. We got everybody on the list except for one. We lost the trail near here so I went off to a Food festival in Costuul while Elsa tried to track down our target. I need to go meet up with her and get back on the hunt."

Subaru scanned the list of names. There was only one left that hadn't been crossed out: 'Kairei vas Sirose an Ithil.'

At the very bottom of the paper was a signature: 'Malcolm an Griest.'

Subaru thought carefully for a moment. "I'm afraid that you won't be finding Elsa," He said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I bumped into her," Subaru said apologetically. "Hey, I didn't know that she was working with you! She tried to attack one of my pawns and... well, what was I supposed to do?"

Lye looked aghast. "You *killed* her?!"

Subaru shrugged, trying to look guilty. *Lye might let this pass if I reveal that I didn't know they were working together. Also, I'm pretty sure that I want Lye to think that I killed Elsa and not Emilia.*

Lye looked devastated. "Gods, Subaru! Do you have any idea how long I've been cultivating that girl?! She was *almost* ready!"

"Ready for what?" Subaru asked.

"Eating! I've been waiting for her to amass enough skills and life experiences to be delectable! Do you realize that I've spent close to twenty years grooming that girl?!"

Question: is this kind of 'grooming' more or less creepy than the kind I usually hear about? If he's been doing it for twenty years then he probably started when Elsa was about ten years old...

Subaru shrugged. "How could I have known?!"

Lye sulked. Finally he shook his head. "Try to be a little more considerate in the future, OK?" Lye grumbled. "Well, at least I still have Meili. Although she probably won't be ripe for another decade," He mourned.

"Hunger is the best sauce," Subaru said again.

Lye snorted. Then he started to chuckle. "I can't believe that you killed Elsa. Gods! Capella is going to start foaming at the mouth when she finds out!"

"See? Silver lining," Subaru said.

"Ugh," He moaned. "But now I need to find the last target all by myself," Lye muttered. "I wanted to use Elsa to do the grunt work!"

"Actually, that's *why* I killed Elsa," Subaru said slowly. "See, I made this girl one of my pawns and Elsa tried to kill her so..."

Lye frowned. "You're protecting the girl?"

Subaru nodded. He felt a bead of cold sweat fall down the back of his neck.

Lye looked annoyed and he thought hard for a long moment.

Lye finally sighed. "Alright, that's action that I just don't need! I don't want the girl enough to fight *you* for her!" He said sullenly.

"Thanks, Lye," Subaru replied.

"I'll head back to the Cathedral and sync up with Capella," He muttered. "You're practically in the Order already so I can't just kill your pawns. I'll let Capella figure out what to do."

"Sounds good," Subaru said, starting to relax. "Hey, would you mind if I kept this?" Subaru asked, raising the paper.

Lye frowned. "I don't know, Subaru. Capella would be furious."

"Sounds like a good reason to me," Subaru deadpanned.

Lye thought for a minute. "Sure, take it!" He shrugged. "If Capella throws a tantrum, I'll just tell her that you took it from me by force. Once she finds out that you got your hands on one of her contracts, she'll turn all kinds of pretty colors."

Subaru chuckled. "Thanks, Lye," He said, tucking the paper into his satchel.

Pierre came back out with a bag of food, "Have a good night, Master Subaru. Master Lye, your food will be out shortly."

Lye squealed in delight.

"I think that I'll just leave you to this, Lye," Subaru sighed, "I doubt that I could add much to this experience for you."

"Great, great," Lye said indifferently, staring greedily at the kitchen door.

Subaru stood up and started to walk away.

"Hey, Subaru," Lye called after him, "When I do find something tasty to exchange for the Authority, how do I find you?"

Subaru sighed. "Ask your Gospel."

Lye slapped his forehead with a chuckle.

Subaru sighed as he walked out of the restaurant and sneaked back to Lowtown and Patrasche.

A short time later, Subaru had sneaked down into Lowtown. However, this time he was carefully dodging city guards.

I guess the guards finally decided to search Lowtown. Isn't that just my luck. They're searching here just when I realize that I need to be here.

Subaru pulled his hooded robe back on. *A person dressed in fine clothing in the slums will probably attract more attention than some guy in a ratty hooded robe.*

Subaru found Patrasche sitting quietly where he had left her.

"OK, girl," He whispered. "I think we have a way out of here. I just hope you're not claustrophobic."

Patrasche gave a nervous moan as Subaru mounted her and she stood up.

"Let's go. Quietly," He said.

Subaru and the dragon slipped off into the shadows.

Felix Argyle was frustrated as he walked through the streets of Ganaks that night. *I've spent almost the entire day in Ganaks and haven't accomplished a damn thing, nya!*

OK, that's unfair. I healed three crippled children and gave them the ability to have normal lives. I also cured a group of people of conditions that likely would have killed them within the month.

That's all well and good, I suppose but none of it really benefits my mistress.

This happens to me everywhere I go. As soon as I visit a place, everyone comes to me begging for healing and I wind up having to put my mistress's errand on hold. Julius and Al wanted to go home but they've had to sit in the town hall waiting for me because they knew that I'd be busy healing people all day!

I know that Crusch expects no less of me but I want to act for her benefit first and foremost. She'd be disappointed in me if I refused healing someone, anyone, so I never do, but Crusch's goals need to be paramount. Crusch will put aside her own interests to help someone in a heartbeat but that means that she needs someone to look after her.

And that's me. I have to keep my eye on her needs to protect my mistress from herself.

Felix heard a gasp and a moan of pain from a nearby alley. Checking a sigh, Felix stopped and then went to investigate.

Stepping into the alley, Felix stopped short. A man lay in front of Felix, shallowly gasping for breath. His body was covered in gruesome wounds.

What happened to this man, nya? These wounds... Someone wasn't just trying to kill him. Someone wanted to torture him!

"Help... me...", The man gasped weakly.

Felix nodded. "I'll do my best, nya. But you're in really bad shape," Felix said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"You're... a knight...I have... valuable intelligence that... I'll trade... for my life."

"Oh?" Felix said skeptically as he began to work on the man. "About what?"

This man is dead. I give him a ten percent chance of survival even with my best efforts.

The man swallowed hard and panted for breath for a moment. "About... Subaru Natsuki... and the Witch Cult..."

Felix stiffened. "What are you saying, nya?" Felix asked as he struggled to stabilize the man.

"My name... is Pierre. I work at Miss Lilian's restaurant. Tonight, Subaru Natsuki... came into my restaurant... and spoke to... a savage killer named Lye..."

"Keep talking, nya," Felix ordered, pulling vials of medicine out of his bag.

I don't know if this is true but if it is then I have to save him. I just wish I felt more confident in my ability to do so...

"Lye... has been a regular patron. He... shows up every couple of months and... eats at my restaurant. He pays for good food... with whole bags of gold," Pierre panted. "But if he's dissatisfied... he... kills people... slowly."

I guess the evening's repast was not to satisfaction...

"Tonight, Lye met with Subaru... Natsuki. Until tonight... I never... knew what Lye... really was. I eavesdropped on them... while they were talking. He told Subaru that he wanted... Subaru to come and... take his seat as a... Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult," Pierre gasped.

Felix's eyes widened. *Could he be lying to buy his life? Why? Why would he think that I would believe this? Nobody could possibly know what Crusch suspects about Subaru Natsuki. The entire country still thinks that he's a hero!*

This is the proof that Crusch needs! I have to save him so he can testify!

"How did Subaru respond?" Felix said, working frantically to stabilize him.

"He... asked a few questions... he seemed... on the fence... He asked... how to find... the Cult and..." Pierre's eyes widened as a major blood vessel in his chest suddenly let go.

"No!" Felix shouted, using every healing spell he could think of to staunch the bleeding.

Pierre's body slowly went limp and his breathing stopped.

No! Not now!

Felix cast every healing spell that a lifetime of training had thought him and finally he slumped to the ground in exhaustion beside a dead body.

I failed Crusch. I had the evidence she needed in my hands and I failed...

I am a failure...

Felix's eyes narrowed. *Wait a second. This was a deathbed confession... Legally, a knight's testimony of a third party's statement can be admissible in court if the third party is deceased or otherwise unavailable for questioning. The law is a little convoluted but the courts do allow it sometimes. Pierre made a free declaration in my presence before he died! All it takes is my oath to confirm what he said! I can still get the evidence for Crusch!*

Felix leapt to his feet, fighting off his exhaustion and raced back to the Ganaks garrison, leaving Pierre's body lying in the gutter.

Julius Juukulius sat on a cot in the Ganaks Garrison sickbay.

Julius checked a sigh as a healer, a young woman with a cheerful face, continued to inspect him thoroughly. "Are we nearly done?" He asked in a calm voice.

"Almost, Sir Julius! I just wish to be through. General Brendig was most concerned about your health!"

More accurately, General Brendig wanted some assurance that whatever Subaru Natsuki had done to me and my spirits hadn't made me his thrall in some unexplained way. Everyone explained to him how ludicrous such a proposition was but Brendig wouldn't listen. This woman has been going over my person and my spirits with a fine-toothed comb for hours and I remain unconvinced that she even knows what she's being asked to look for.

"If I might ask, where is Sir Felix?" Julius said. "I believe I saw him returning to the garrison some time ago. Perhaps he could assist in wrapping this up quicker?"

"Oh. I'm afraid that Sir Felix has left the garrison again."

Julius frowned. "Truly?"

"Yes. I spoke to him briefly, Sir Julius. He came here to submit a deposition of some kind for Lady Crusch Karnstein. Then I'm told he left the garrison again to help with a medical emergency."

Julius held his chin, deep in thought. *That's not like Felix. Yes, he's called upon for medical emergencies regularly but it isn't like him to bolt off again without speaking to me. Honestly, I'm surprised that he didn't demand to take over my treatment the moment he discovered that I was in the sickbay. He usually does, no matter how minor the injury. It's one of the ways that Felix displays his affection for his friends. Perhaps this medical emergency truly was dire?*

And what was this deposition that he provided?

"I believe that we're done, Sir Julius," The healer said with a bow.

"Am I in good health?" Julius said, trying not to sound annoyed.

"Entirely. Please assure the General that I have run every diagnostic test I can think of on you *and* your spirit companions. There is no sign of any kind of magical influence on you whatsoever."

"Splendid," Julius said, rising to his feet. "I will pass that along. Thank you very much for your diligence."

"Oh! And I almost forgot: The General asked that you meet him in the council room in the conference room. Apparently, there is some new high level intelligence that the General and Lady Crusch Karnstein wish to discuss with you."

Julius nodded. "Thank you."

He swept from the room.

Subaru realized quickly that he couldn't just brazen it out in Lowtown the way he had in Hightown. It was obvious that the city guard considered everyone in Lowtown to be suspicious. The guards wasted no time grabbing the locals and threatening them and even beating them until they were satisfied that they truly didn't know anything about Subaru. The demi-humans and the few humans living down here seemed to be viewed as little more than animals by the city guard.

Luckily, the ruined and dilapidated houses in Lowtown provided ample cover as Subaru and Patrasche crept through the slums and closer to the mine.

The mine entrance was like a huge depression in the earth. Subaru hid Patrasche nearby and sneaked over to the edge and took a look down over the ridge.

"Guards. Naturally," Subaru sighed.

It looks like the guards have been told to search the mine shafts but they don't seem all that enthused about the job. That's promising. They'll probably just hang around here long enough to convince their bosses that they did their jobs and then head back.

I see the tunnel that Lye told me about. It's got warning signs all around it. No guard is even going near that entrance.

Huh. The guards with arrows have all lit one of them on fire as makeshift candles. That's almost clever. It's even smarter that they're keeping their distance from the mine entrance.

I just need to wait for the guards to get bored and wander off. Then we'll slip inside.

"...And then he fled, Lady Crusch," Julius said.

Julius sat in a small room in the garrison at Ganaks. General Brendig sat silently beside him. The communication system displayed Crusch Karnstein as a hazy blue image standing in the middle of the room since she was still far away in the capitol.

"Julius, explain. What do you mean by 'he took your spirits away?'" Crusch asked.

"Just as I said, Lady Crusch," Julius replied. "He invoked some unfathomable magic against me. And my spirits, who have been my loyal companions since I was a boy, immediately forgot that I ever existed. They joined their power with his and it was a simple act of charity on his part that caused him not to turn their magic against me. They have made it clear to me that if he had so commanded them to destroy me, in that moment they would have obeyed."

"Can the spirits tell you anything about how it was done?"

"Not very much," Julius admitted. "They feel horribly guilty about what happened but they're not able to tell me how it happened. For them, at that specific moment, joining their strength to Subaru Natsuki's was simply the most natural thing in the world. They compared it to water running downhill."

"How could he have acquired such power?" Crusch mused.

"Subaru Natsuki claimed that it was the world itself which gave him this strength. He called it 'the power to control the magic of the world.'"

"That is ludicrous! Could it perhaps be something that the Witch did while you weren't looking? Or even a power that she lent him?"

"The witch was not present. Lady Crusch, with all due respect, I am beginning to think that Subaru Natsuki could be a more deadly threat than any witch. I have never experienced power like his before! If, as he claims, the world truly has ceded him authority over its magic-"

"Impossible," Crusch dismissed. "Anything else to report?"

"My bond with my spirit partners has been badly weakened by Subaru Natsuki's witchcraft. It will take time until I can summon the full force of their magic as I did before," Julius sighed. "Moreover, I am forced to admit that... I was completely unprepared to face Subaru Natsuki in combat. I have no excuse for my failure."

"I wasn't aware that Subaru Natsuki had become such a skilled duelist," Crusch mused.

Julius shook his head violently. "Nor is he, Lady Crusch! His skill was laughable! Even pitiable! I truly would have believed that he had never held a sword before in his life! His stance was terrible, his grip weak, and his knowledge of technique would be embarrassing to even the most elementary student of swordplay! But somehow, each time I struck at him, he not only managed to parry but parried the very tip of my blade with *the Ricasso* of his!"

Crusch frowned. "That is a very risky strategy," She criticized, "It allows him to easily push your sword away despite

using a slender rapier but in doing so he allows you almost under his guard with each parry and there is no margin for error in his defense. Missing your sword by a matter of millimeters could be fatal."

Julius shook his head. "So I thought. I initially believed the fight would be over comically quickly and yet it dragged on and on! I can't imagine anyone except Sir Reinhard successfully using a sword to parry in this fashion, although he would not do so as it would be purely to show off. Yet Subaru Natsuki caught every strike flawlessly!"

Crusch looked grim. "I've learned the hard way to never underestimate Subaru Natsuki, Sir Julius. The times when he is bumbling and clowning around are when one must be most suspicious. He is a master strategist and a schemer without equal. He consistently manages to lead his foes to underestimate him even when they should know better. Please do not be offended by this as he tricked me time and time again in the same way."

Julius sighed.

Crusch pursed her lips. "How did the fight end?"

Julius shook his head. "Eventually, I grew weary. My sword was far heavier than his slender rapier. It was clear that he was simply waiting for me to exhaust myself but I had no opportunity to end the fight! Finally, out of sheer desperation I faked a stumble, hoping to goad him into an unwise attack. He took it and I finally got under his guard only to discover that he'd turned my trap into his own and he effortlessly brought me to bay!"

Crusch stared at Julius in amazement.

Julius sighed. "I feel as though I was defeated by a child! I am filled with the sense of ineptitude one can only feel upon realization that you have been bested by a foe who is in no way your equal!"

"Do not be so ungenerous to yourself, Sir Julius," Crusch replied kindly. "Subaru Natsuki has played all of us for fools at one time or another. Fail to underestimate him a second time and your record will be far better than mine," Crusch said with grim humor.

Julius bowed his head. "As you say, Lady Crusch. What are my new orders? I am prepared to continue to pursue Subaru Natsuki if you wish it but I must confess that I candidly have small hope for success in this matter, especially if we at all desire to take him alive. I fear that no one less than the Sword Saint could hope to contend with him now."

Crusch absorbed that for a moment. "General Brendig, have you dispatched Felix's missive?"

"Lady Crusch, I have been provided with Sir Felix's... deposition," Brendig said awkwardly. "It was composed, signed, and witnessed by ranking members of the Ganaks authorities as the law requires. Rest assured I have already dispatched this document with his sworn testimony to you by the speediest means possible."

"Thank you, General," Crusch replied. "Felix's testimony is of critical importance to the security of the nation."

"Yes, of course," Brendig murmured, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

Crusch sighed. "In any event, Sir Julius, I'm afraid that we have dire news to discuss. Felix and Aldebaran have already been appraised but I believe you have not heard the latest intelligence."

"My lady?"

"We've received word that House Griest of Gusteko is preparing a major offensive. They are equipping a second army for a military advance and have been joined by large detachments from the other Houses. In light of Voivode's previous threats against us we can only assume that this column is intended to attack Lagunica and reclaim Ganaks. We only received this intelligence today. Malcolm an Griest has taken us all by surprise by proving willing to open a second front against Lagunica before the first front against Siros is settled. They have dispatched an entire army including three of the Acolyte Knights."

Julius gasped.

"Only a fool fights a war on two fronts," Brendig muttered.

"This is true and it is very likely that this error will cost him the dearly, General," Crusch replied grimly. "But he will do great harm in the meantime. He has taken us completely off guard due to this farcical decision. Our forces are scattered, some dealing with the havoc caused by the Witch Cult and some holding the Vollachian Empire at bay. We have no chance of getting reinforcements to Ganaks in time. I've dispatched an army north under General Haig but it won't arrive for several days. By then, all they can hope to do is push the invaders back across the border."

Julius shook his head. "But Reinhard-"

"Reinhard van Astrea is off in the eastern desert investigating a sighting of the witch and Subaru Natsuki. A sighting that we must now conclude was planted as a diversion. He is completely out of contact by any means we possess. By the time we would be able to get word to him, the city would already be in flames."

Julius's mouth was a grim slash. "When will the invaders arrive?"

"Our best estimates are two days. You must prepare to evacuate."

"Evacuate?! A city of a hundred thousand people in *two days*!?" Julius protested.

"I know, Julius. It's a dirty business. I must take personal responsibility for failing to protect Ganaks. My failure to see

this coming is the cause of this nightmare but every life we save is one more life saved."

"Sir Julius is quite correct, Lady Crusch," General Brendig muttered. "Two days is not nearly enough time! We'll need to send our own forces out to delay the army's advance."

Crusch frowned and shook her head. "General Brendig that will mean meeting a vastly superior military force in open country!"

"I said 'delay,' Lady Crusch. Not battle," He said grimly.

"Even hit and run tactics would seem unreasonably risky," Crusch pointed out.

"To reach Ganaks, this army will need to cross several bridges that ford the river Jamark," Brendig said. "We'll send out a small force under Sir Julius to harass the enemy by knocking those bridges down, one by one. Each destroyed bridge will delay the invaders for hours and that will mean hundreds, perhaps thousands more civilians can be properly equipped for a journey and evacuated."

Crusch thought for a moment then slowly nodded. "It is a very risky strategy but it appears to be our only chance. Sir Julius, are you willing to accept this mission? It will be extremely dangerous. We have limited intelligence in the field. You and your men could easily be ambushed by scouts or skirmishers."

"I am eager to do all that I can to protect the people of Lagunica," Julius said calmly.

Crusch stared at him for a long moment. She slowly nodded. "Sir Julius. Do only what you can and then withdraw. Do not take any unacceptable risks. We can't afford to lose you."

Julius nodded. "Lady Crusch, are you aware if Lady Anastasia is available? I need to speak with her immediately."

Crusch nodded. "As it happens, she is currently in the castle holding a conference with her supporters. I'll ask her to contact you shortly." She hesitated. "Sir Julius, I hope that... you are not intending to say goodbye."

"Have no fear of that, Lady Crusch. I simply require instruction from my Lady," Julius said calmly.

"Yes, of course. Forgive me for my tactless assumption. I will go find Lady Anastasia immediately." The blue illusion of Crusch faded from sight.

Brendig's face was a grim scowl. "I'll gather up our finest military engineers to join you on this mission. Can I assume you will be ready to depart within the hour?"

"Of course," Julius replied coolly, still not quite having forgiven Brendig for ordering his medical evaluation. "I will address them as soon as they are assembled and then we will head out. I assume that Aldebaran and Sir Felix will be joining me?"

"I'm told that Priscilla has already recalled her 'gladiator' and that he has left the city," Brendig said dismissively. "I have no idea where Felix went or what this 'medical emergency' was, so I have no idea when he'll return."

Julius frowned. "I'll be with you shortly then, my Lord General. First I must speak with Lady Anastasia."

Julius was sitting in the same room as before when a blue illusion of Anastasia appeared before him.

"My Lady," Julius said formally, falling to his knees.

"Julius, Crusch has told me what's going on. Are you alright?" She asked urgently.

"Please be at ease, Lady Anastasia. Subaru Natsuki did me no injury," Julius responded.

"I was more worried about the fact that an army is about to attack the city that you're in! When are you going to evacuate?"

Julius hesitated a long moment. "I have an idea for how the populace at least might be preserved, my Lady. However, I will require your permission-

"You do not have my permission to throw your life away, Julius! Do you hear me?! You will not die in some heroic sacrifice! I need you!"

Julius's face flushed. He coughed. "No, Lady Anastasia. I had no intention of dying, heroically or otherwise. General Brendig has a plan that might allow the city to be fully evacuated. However, I will need your permission."

"What is this plan?" She asked suspiciously.

"General Brendig has requested to lead a small company of men out of the city to destroy bridges and delay the advancing army. With luck, this will give us the time we need to fully evacuate the city."

"Julius, this sounds very risky," Anastasia worried.

Julius nodded. "I can not deny this, Lady Anastasia. There will be considerable risk but success would offer us the chance to save thousands of lives. It would also offer considerable prestige to your ladyship in her attempts to gain the throne."

Anastasia looked at Julius for a long time. "Julius. You make sure that you come back to me safely. You hear me?" She said finally.

Julius's face flushed red. "Yes, my lady."

A group of thirty soldiers stood at attention in the courtyard. Despite the late hour, General Brendig's personal guard had readied themselves quickly for combat.

"Is everything ready, Captain Dannath?" Julius asked the commander of the army engineers.

"At your order, sir!" Dannath snapped a salute. "Fall in!" Dannath shouted and the soldiers fell into perfect ranks.

Julius stepped forward to address them. "Men," Julius said in a clear voice. "I will not deceive you. This is a desperate mission and our situation is grave. We will do all that is possible to avoid contact with the enemy. That said, it is entirely possible that we may be spotted and attacked by superior forces. However, in spite of this risk, by our actions we may have the opportunity to save thousands of innocent people from the horrors of war. We will depart now and perform a forced march to the source of the river Jamark. We hope to arrive by tomorrow night. We will use all our skills to break every bridge between there and Ganaks and give the people time to evacuate. If we are successful, there is even a chance that the entire city might be saved. General Haig and a powerful army marches north even now and they are just a few days away. If we can stall the enemy army for that amount of time we may save Ganaks without battle at all! No army wishes to attack a superior force in a fortified position and Ganaks is well nigh impregnable."

Julius looked the men over and gave a firm nod. "We march now and we must go quickly! With luck, we will be at the headwaters just after dark. March forth! To save our people!"

There was a cheer as the men began to march quickly behind Julius.

General Brendig watched them go from the garrison in Hightown.

"Lieutenant," Brendig called.

"Sir!" His assistant snapped to attention.

"Send a message to Lord Montefort. Tell him that Julius Juukulius has left the city."

Subaru watched as the city guards finally pulled out of the Pit. He nudged Patrasche forward and they crept silently toward the mine entrance with all the warning signs around it.

Subaru noticed one sign was covered in graffiti and as Lye had promised it had a red hand painted on it.

'Danger. Extreme firedamp.' Well, at least firedamp isn't deadly just from breathing it. ...I don't think...

Fuck, I'm not sure. I know that firedamp is explosive but I don't know if it's toxic in high quantities.

Wait, Lye uses this tunnel. What am I worried about? If he can survive it so can we.

Patrasche reached the entrance and balked, moaning at Subaru.

"I know, girl," He rubbed her head. "I don't want to go in there either. But we need to. It's our only way out."

Patrasche looked at Subaru with misery written on her face. She sighed and started to enter the cave.

"Lieutenant!" A voice screamed from behind him.

Subaru spun around and saw a crossbowman standing there.

"I see him! It's the witch!"

Subaru's heart stopped when he realized that the crossbowman had loaded a flaming arrow.

"Oh, shit!" Subaru whispered. He kicked Patrasche and the dragon took off like lightning. Subaru had no interest in steering his mount as long as she took him away from there.

Before Patrasche had even gone into a sprint, the arrow had already left the bow and was streaming toward the cave mouth like a flaming comet.

The other soldiers raced toward the mine just in time to hear a thunderous explosion and be knocked flat by a concussive shock-wave as the mine tunnel's roof shattered into a huge ball of fire.

The shock-wave hit Subaru and Patrasche in the back like a dozen sledge hammers.

Patrasche roared in pain as she was launched into the air but somehow the dragon landed on her feet and kept running as the fireball kept expanding behind them.

Subaru and Patrasche desperately raced back toward Midtown, looking for a place to hide.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Lady Doniki," Montefort said with a bow.

"Yes, of course," Lady Doniki of Costuul said with a yawn. She was an older woman with graying hair who was one of the leaders of the Moderate faction of the nobility. Most of these nobles, including Doniki, had yet to pledge their support to any royal candidate.

They sat in Lady Doniki's dimly lit sitting room in her town house in the capitol. She had been unceremoniously awakened in the dead of night by Montefort's arrival and she sat in a chair across from Montefort in a dressing gown as she had been assured that there was no time to change. "Now please, Lord Montefort, what was so important that it could not wait until morning. Has there been a break in the investigation regarding tonight's bombing? Or does this concern the word I received about Gusteko's impending attack on northern Lagunica?"

"Neither one directly," Montefort replied. "However, I think we might be able to leverage both."

"Leverage them?"

"I have a bit of legislation for your consideration," Montefort handed her a piece of parchment.

Doniki took out her spectacles and read the parchment with an increasingly incredulous frown. "Lord Montefort, may I speak bluntly?"

"By all means."

"Have you *completely* taken leave of your senses?!"

"I admit, that was blunter than I expected," Montefort commented.

"Do you really intend to go before the royal assembly and, without a shred of evidence, urge the chamber to convict a royal candidate and a public hero of practicing *witchcraft*?!"

"It seems to me that we have plenty of evidence," Montefort said calmly. "His own faction admits that he's been traveling the land with a witch."

Doniki stared at Montefort for a long time. She spoke in a strained voice, "Lord Montefort, Subaru Natsuki has been seen traveling with a silver haired half-elf. That's all. I understand that *your* faction is willing to... take on faith that all demi-humans are suspect and all silver haired half elves are witches but for those of us who come from districts with a larger demi-human population, we must take a more... nuanced view of things."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, can you even imagine the kind of riots that would be touched off in demi-human communities if we convicted Subaru Natsuki of witchcraft based solely on his association with a demi-human woman? The Demi-Human Alliance has been relegated to the fringes for fifty years, limited to terrorist attacks and isolated murders. Now imagine that the kingdom makes it clear that simply associating with a demi-human is grounds for trial and conviction *in absentia*. Such an insult to the demi-human populace would breathe new life into their movement. I would not relish a new civil war!"

"That is precisely what I hope to avoid," Montefort said calmly. "Subaru Natsuki has been stirring up the demi-humans and peasants in ways not seen in centuries. They might very well march. Take a moment to imagine *that*. Thus, I think we are both in agreement that Subaru Natsuki's coronation is absolutely unacceptable?"

Doniki thought for a moment and then gravely nodded.

"Then it seems to me that this is our best option for removing Subaru Natsuki from the equation. A charge of witchcraft would immediately invalidate his entire camp and remove him from the selection. Better yet, it would justify us suspending the royal selection to allow an investigation into potential malfeasance within the election. We can determine a king acceptable to all parties later."

"I heartily agree with your goals, Montefort, but you need to have *some* kind of pretense for it! Nobody is going to believe the charge of 'witch' when you slap it on Subaru Natsuki on such flimsy evidence."

Montefort shrugged. "Zyst, Pickett, and I already have the numbers in the assembly to force it through. I was simply hoping that you would work with us, not against us."

Doniki stared at Montefort. "How did you convince so many people to go along with this idiocy?!"

"Essentially, I just kept asking them if they had any better ideas to get rid of Subaru Natsuki. Then I reminded them that if he's this popular in three months, in two years he might have enough support to simply dissolve the assembly all together. I admit that this is a ham-fisted approach but it's the best option that we have right now. Besides, we do have advantages if we act quickly."

"Such as?"

"The bombing last night ties Subaru Natsuki to the Witch Cult and the impending Gusteko attack will distract the populace."

"Wait. How does the bombing tie Subaru Natsuki's faction to the Witch Cult?" Doniki asked in confusion.

"Come now. A Witch Cultist appears at their rally? How does it *not* tie them together?"

"Lord Montefort, I am rather skeptical that this bomber was a Witch Cultist at all. Bombs are the weapon of choice of the Demi-Human Alliance, not the Witch Cult, and nobody at the scene was recovered alive to be questioned or give a

report. Moreover, the bomber *attacked* the Subaru faction's rally. He killed several people there. That's hardly an expression of support."

"I admit that we'll have to talk very fast to make this stick," Montefort agreed. "However, my point still stands. Subaru Natsuki must be dealt with and he must be dealt with *soon*. If you have a better idea then I'm very happy to entertain it but so far this is what we have. If McMahon hadn't committed that massive blunder and opened an investigation into Subaru being a witch, we might have had time to find a different scandal to pin on him. However, as it stands, we're all in on the charge of witchcraft now. If these charges are dismissed, we'll never make the next scandal stick. Nobody would believe that we were acting in good faith. Everyone will accuse us of desperately trying to find anything to charge him with. So allow me to be equally blunt, Lady Doniki: Are you *with* us or *against* us?" Montefort asked pleasantly.

Emilia hid in a rocky ridge near the craggy city of Ganaks. There were a few patrols making the rounds outside the city as well as several on top of the wall. Luckily, they all carried torches and they seemed to be unaware that these torches reduced their night vision to nothing.

Emilia waited in the shadows until the guards had walked away and then flitted to the great gate of Ganaks.

She touched the rusty portcullis. The gaps in the metal were almost large enough for her to squeeze through.

I might be able to shatter it, Emilia thought. *If I freeze the metal and then hit with something hard then maybe...*

Emilia peered through the portcullis and saw a full platoon of guards standing watch on the other side.

That's no good. There's no point in breaking in only to have to fight the whole city. I need to sneak in.

And once I do sneak in, how can I possibly find Subaru? This is one of the biggest cities in the world!

Have the soldiers captured him or is he still safe?

...Well, he's probably not safe but the soldiers almost certainly haven't found him yet or they wouldn't still be actively hunting for him.

Emilia sighed. *Subaru, where are you when I need you? I know that you'd have a plan if I was the one trapped inside the city...*

Emilia heard a patrol coming toward the gate and she bolted away, hiding in the shadows between the city wall and the great, turning water wheel.

The patrol stood in front of the gate, torches in hand, as they chatted for a few minutes. Then they walked away.

A falling stone almost brained Emilia where she stood. Luckily, it hit the paddle of the waterwheel instead. She looked up and saw a patrol on the upper wall, carrying torches.

For a horrified moment, Emilia thought that she'd been discovered but then the sentries turned around and kept walking around the city.

Emilia looked up and realized that the stone which had landed on the paddle had been carried up above the wall before being dumped into the waterfall and falling down into the river.

This waterwheel might be my way in.

But something about this makes me nervous. This is an obvious vulnerability to the city. Why isn't it better guarded?

Emilia bit her lip. *It's my best chance, regardless.*

When the next paddle came sullenly up out of the water, Emilia took a flying leap to it and barely managed to catch the edge.

She struggled to pull herself up onto the flattening paddle and looked up at the wall.

Oh no. More guards. I need to hide!

Emilia thought about jumping off and into the deep pool beneath her but she was worried that the guards would hear the splash and come investigate.

She felt the paddle tilt up in the opposite direction as the wheel turned.

Oh. I don't have to hide. I'll just stay here behind the paddle.

It seemed like a good plan and Emilia was fairly proud of it until she realized that the floor was slipping out from under her feet.

Emilia started to slid down toward the pool beneath her but she sprang off the paddle just as it turned vertical and made a desperate leap for the paddle in front of it. The water from the pool beneath her stank of chemicals and other contaminants.

Emilia panted for breath as the paddle straightened out in front of her. Then she gasped and covered her head as the

wheel swept her through a raging torrent of falling water that tried to sweep her off the paddle.

Emilia barely held on. She struggled to breath under the raging water as the paddle left the waterfall behind, far too slowly for her comfort.

She gasped as her head was finally clear of the waterfall. She was forced pull herself up over the top of the paddle as it went vertical and almost completely sank into the pool at the bottom of the wheel.

Emilia pulled herself up as the paddle started to rise again.

I hope that those guards are gone by now. I really don't want to do this again, Emilia moaned.

Emilia looked up at the approaching wall.

There are no lights on the parapet. That means no guards, right?

Emilia bit her lip. As the paddle began to tilt up she sprinted to the rising end and made a running leap off the side.

The distance was further than she'd thought. Her heart stopped as she began to fall.

Emilia stretched a hand out toward the wheel and fired a burst of icy wind. The jet of cold air pushed her closer to the wall and she landed on top of the ramparts, gasping for breath.

Oh. That's why the wheel isn't better guarded, She thought. *Nobody could have made that jump!*

I need to start thinking before I act!

Emilia shook her head and got to her feet. *I don't have long before the patrols come back this way. I need to figure out how I'm going to find Subaru.*

Emilia peered down into the enormous city before her. She saw nice neighborhoods built onto a spire of rock in the center of the city that looked like a mountain and more modest neighbors spread out on flat land. She also saw what could only be slums near an enormous pit that had been dug in the city.

This place is almost as big as the capitol! Where do I even start looking?!

Just then, there was a thunderous explosion and an enormous ball of fire leaped up from the pit.

Emilia shook her head. "That just *has* to be Subaru," She muttered, taking off at a run.

Anri was sitting outside the crumbling farm house, waiting for some sign of her companions. Dawn wasn't far off and she'd seen nothing.

In the distance, she saw the portcullis rise. She watched closely. A moment later her hopes were dashed as it was just a large contingent of soldiers marching out of the city.

Anri's eyes narrowed as she realized that they weren't just patrolling. These soldiers were marching somewhere with purpose.

Her eyes widened as she realized that they were marching straight to her.

Did Subaru and Emilia betray-

No! Close off that thought, you ungrateful brat! They are your friends and they have risked their lives to help you. They will not sell you out now.

But regardless of the why, those troops are moving in this direction. I should get under cover.

And maybe not hide in the house. Just in case.

Anri fled back into the tree line, laid down on the ground and watched the marching soldiers closely.

The soldiers got close enough for Anri to pick out details of their appearance as they marched toward her hiding place.

The man in front was a knight of some kind. He had purple hair and a spotless white uniform.

This man is a member of the Lagunican Royal Guard. That means that he's a powerful fighter. The soldiers behind him look potent as well. These men are wearing the insignia of a noble. They're not just rank and file, they're some nobleman's personal guard.

Maybe they serve the Governor of Ganaks? Why would he send his own personal soldiers out here?

Subaru told me that his name is General Brendig but I don't know much about him. I never studied him since it seemed unlikely that we'd ever cross paths.

Anri watched as the knight and the soldiers came closer. Their path began to angle away from the farmhouse and Anri so she began to relax.

A sudden flash of movement caught Anri's eye.

One of the soldiers in the front rank had drawn a dagger. His fellows saw but they made no sign.

"Look out!" Anri screamed at the top of her lungs.

The knight jumped and looked behind him, barely dodging the dagger aimed at his back.

The knight quickly drew his sword but the soldiers were also drawing their weapons.

What is going on here?!

The knight fought with skill and fury but he was outnumbered thirty to one and the men tried to flank him.

Anri saw a soldier slip behind the knight with a drawn sword.

Anri picked up a large stone with her one good arm and flung it at the soldier.

The stone hit his nose with an audible crunch and the soldier went down, rubbing his face.

"Run!" Anri screamed at the knight.

The knight looked at her and his mouth tightened but he saw that he was outmatched and he broke into a sprint toward Anri.

The soldiers pursued but they were dressed in heavy armor and it slowed them down.

Anri grabbed the knight's hand. "This way!" She shouted, leading him down a specific rough trail through the woods.

"Where are we going?" The knight demanded.

They heard the sound of the soldiers breaking through the woods at an angle trying to cut them off. Then there was a serious of howls of pain followed by thuds and much cursing.

Anri grinned at the knight. "Away from my traps!"

As Anri and the knight sped away, Anri was glad that she'd decided to keep her hands busy while she waited.

Anri and the knight fled through the woods. The sound of the soldiers crashing through the underbrush became steadily more distance.

"My lady," The knight said as they moved through the brush. "I am forever in your debt for your timely intervention."

"Think nothing of it, Sir Knight," Anri replied by rote. "I was merely grateful to have been able to offer aid to you in a time of need."

The knight nodded. "Your courtesy is most becoming, my Lady. Might I have the privilege of knowing your name?"

Anri sighed. *What difference does it make?* "I am Kairei vas Sirose an Ithil."

The knight started. "The missing princess?"

The knight would have fallen to his knees but Anri grabbed the startled knight and held up upright. "We don't have time for that!" She snapped, forcing him to keep moving.

"Over-trained, perhaps," The knight admitted. "My name is Sir Julius Juukulius of Lagunica."

"It's wonderful to meet you," Anri replied as she fought her way through the thick woods, looking for someplace that they could hide. "You can call me 'Anri.' Any idea why those soldiers would want you dead?"

"I am completely perplexed, your Highness-"

"'Anri' will be fine," Anri grumbled.

"...Anri," Julius said after a moment. "Those soldiers were assigned to me by General Brendig himself. I couldn't imagine that anyone would be capable of subverting his entire personal guard."

Anri looked at him incredulously. "You're right, Sir Julius. I can't imagine that either. It's close to impossible," She said as if speaking to a small child. "Which *means* that you *should* be asking why Brendig wants you dead."

Julius frowned. "Are you suggesting that the General might have ordered them to attack me?!"

Anri sighed. "I'm not suggesting it, Sir Julius, I'm saying it flat out! It's the only possible explanation! Nobody can bribe thirty men and expect them to all keep their mouths shut!"

Julius looked aghast. "I am... shaken to my very core."

"Why? Were you two close?" Anri asked.

"Not at all but still, I can't imagine why the General would plot against me. Especially in times such as these."

"Such as what?"

"Those soldiers and I were ordered to march out and delay the Gusteko soldiers coming to lay siege to Ganaks," Julius explained.

Anri blinked. "Come again?"

"House Griest has raised a new army-"

"I know that part," Anri said, looking at Julius with a baffled expression. "But Sir Julius, that army is for finishing off *my* people at Siros."

"Please call me 'Julius,'" He replied. "And Lady Crusch has reason to believe that House Griest and its allies seek to expand hostilities with us. They sent the Sages' Council a list of demands just this past week."

Anri shook her head. "Look, Julius," She sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I have more reason to hate Malcolm an Griest than most but he's not a *fool*! He's not going to pick a fight with Lagunica! He'd get crushed! He was probably just blowing smoke. Beating his chest for the other Houses," She paused. "What demands did he send you anyway?"

"As I understand it, House Griest and Voivode were demanding the return of Ganaks and much of northern Lagunica as reparations for a cowardly attack at Iruk by the villain Subaru Natsuki and his Witch."

Anri sighed. "He's worse than a fool. He's a liar."

"My fellows and I were sent to investigate the charges," Julius admitted. "His claims of substantial damage to Iruk were nothing but lies. However, a liar may speak the truth, even if only by accident. I faced Subaru Natsuki today and can attest to the strange and dangerous powers he possess."

Anri grabbed the startled Julius. "What do you mean? You fought Subaru? Is he alright?! What about Emilia?!"

Julius stared at her baffled. "What is this to you?"

"Just answer the question!" Anri growled.

Julius's face darkened. "Yes, I located Subaru Natsuki this evening. He defeated me in combat then fled the scene before he could be arrested. His power has wounded my connection to my loyal spirit companions and drastically reduced my strength at a most inopportune time. I have no idea what happened to him after that. He had not been apprehended when I departed the city. I have had no contact whatsoever with Subaru Natsuki's witch."

Anri grabbed her temples and grit her teeth. "What do I do?! I should go back there and try to help them."

"'Help them?'" Julius repeated incredulously. "My lady, Subaru Natsuki is a rogue and a possessor of strange unnatural power. I remain uncertain if it is his witch or he himself who is the greater danger!"

Anri gave Julius such a piercing look that he actually took a step back. "Sir Julius," Anri said imperiously. "I will thank you not to speak so in my presence! Subaru Natsuki and Emilia Half-elven have saved me from danger time and time again at great risk to their own lives. They have offered me succor and protection and kindness when I was lost, alone, and scared. I have the very great honor of considering them both to be good friends and I hope to have the privilege of hosting them in Siros. Thus, in accordance with the rules of chivalry, I must insist that you not insult them in my presence."

Julius's jaw almost hit the ground. He was nothing but flabbergasted. It had been years since anyone had felt the need to correct his manners and now he was being chastised for rudeness by a girl several years his junior. Julius didn't know how to react. "As your ladyship commands," He said in an unsteady voice.

Could she perhaps have been bewitched as well, Julius wondered.

"My lady, are you aware of Subaru's bewitch-"

"Nobody has been bewitched," Anri said dismissively, as she paced back and forth trying to think.

"And how are you so certain of that?" Julius asked coolly.

"Because I've spent time with them. Because I've listened to them fight, argue, and scream at each other. None of these things would have happened if Subaru was under some kind of spell," She said, barely paying attention to Julius's words as she focused on trying to decide what to do.

Julius frowned. "Perhaps," He admitted after a moment's thought. "Do you know where the witch-"

"Emilia!" Anri snapped.

Julius hesitated. "E...milia," Julius said awkwardly. "Do you know where she is at this time?"

Anri shook her head. "She went into Ganaks to try to rescue Subaru."

Julius jumped and looked back through the dense trees in concern as if he thought that he could see signs of the city in flames.

Subaru and Patrasche raced through the city at top speed. The bells were clanging everywhere and the city was in an uproar.

My only saving grace is that, so far, the guards seem more worried about the fires burning in the pit than they are about me. This is probably the first time in years these authorities cared about what was going on in Lowtown. I guess since fires rise, they're worried that the smoke and flames might reach the home of somebody 'who actually matters.'

Oh shit. You know that they're going to blame me for this mess! This is just more rope for them to hang me with!

'Subaru Natsuki attempts to burn Ganaks to the ground!'

Good thing Anri is willing to take us in, at least for a while! We aren't going to be welcome in Lagunica any time soon!

"Subaru!" A voice called.

Subaru snapped his head up and reined Patrasche in. He saw Emilia standing on a city level above him. Her hair glowed silver in the moonlight and Subaru thought she had never looked more beautiful.

"Emilia?" He gasped. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you!" Emilia said, leaping down onto a house's roof and then springing lightly onto the street.

Subaru gave her a baffled look and then shook his head. "Well, as little as I like you risking your life, if you have a plan for how we can get out of here I'm all ears!"

Subaru helped Emilia climb up on Patrasche.

Emilia bit her lip. "I'm thinking, Subaru. I'm not sure if we can get out the same way that I got in..."

Subaru looked around. "Alright, let's get under cover while we think our way out of this mess."

In a small clearing, Anri paced back and forth while Julius stood there awkwardly.

"My lady," Julius said. "Forgive me, but I really do need to be getting back to the capitol. Especially if war is in the offing."

"Hey! *I'm* not the one keeping you here," Anri retorted, her hands folded behind her back and her face twisted with concentration. "But I can assure you that nobody in Gusteko is looking to fight Lagunica right now. I don't know who's giving you this 'intelligence' but they're either wrong or they're deceiving you."

Julius flushed. "Be that as it may, I need to return home. Is there... any way that you could assist me?"

Anri looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Julius, Subaru has my sword. I came here on Subaru's dragon and my only hope of trying to keep my people from slaughter is the possibility of Subaru and Emilia's assistance. I am absolutely helpless right now to help you, my people, or even myself and I absolutely hate it!" Her voice raised in a frustrated shout.

Julius looked at Anri in sympathy. "I would remind you, my lady, that just a few hours ago you singlehandedly saved my own life, at considerable risk to your own."

Anri sighed. "Thank you for the reminder, Sir Julius. But it's not much comfort right now. Not only are my people still in grave danger but my dear friends are as well and once again, I sit here able to do nothing to help them but offer up my thoughts and prayers!" She said bitterly.

Julius thought for a moment then bowed his head. "My loyalty to the Lady Anastasia is absolute, Anri. Regardless, I owe you a great debt and I am confident that my Lady Anastasia would not see it otherwise. My obligations to Lady Anastasia must remain dominant but if there is any way that my sword could be of use to you, I offer it freely."

Anri gave him half a smile. "Thank you, Sir Julius. Your reputation as 'the Finest of Knights' precedes you in the north as well. I see now that it is well deserved."

There was a stirring in the brush nearby. Anri stiffened and Julius drew his sword.

A moment later, dozens and dozens of soldiers wearing Gusteko uniforms marched slowly out of the woods.

"Lady Kairei," The officer said with a knowing smirk.

Anri gaped.

Julius made a quick calculation and grabbed her hand. "Run!" He shouted as the pair fled deeper into the forest with the soldiers in pursuit.

Subaru and Emilia hid in a beautiful park in Hightown near to the town hall. They sat in a protective grove of the rose garden with Patrasche sitting nearby.

This is either brilliant or idiotic. Maybe both. I'm hiding in a park next to the city hall where they already saw me.

Well, nobody has found us here so far so I guess it's not completely idiotic.

"I was here earlier," Subaru murmured. "I thought it would be a great place to come on a date but this isn't the romantic evening that I had in mind."

"Subaru, what happened in here?" Emilia asked.

He sighed. "Well, I did our shopping and then I sent Anri's letter. I was about leave the city when guess who I ran into? Julius Juukuliuss!"

Emilia frowned, searching her memory. "Reinhard's friend? The one serving Lady Anastasia?" She asked uncertainly.

"That's him. I just randomly bumped into him in this very park and he challenged me to a fight."

I'm shocked that she doesn't remember him more vividly. I was ready to drink his blood after the way he was trying to monopolize Emilia's attention at that party. Funny that he made so little impact on her.

Emilia sighed. "Subaru, we have the worst luck."

"Yeah. Anyway, I ended up fighting him which was a desperate affair but I managed to fend him off. Then I tried to leave town only to discover that old war horse General Brendig had sounded the alarm and sealed the city! I hid out in Lowtown for a bit then I went to Miss Lilian's to try and locate Victoire's contact. He wasn't there and he wasn't on the employee roster. The guy I talked to was pretty vague about his employees so I'm not sure if the guy just moved on or if he's another Shadow that Griest somehow killed. But you know who *was* at the restaurant tonight? Lye!"

Emilia gasped. "Subaru! Are you alright?!" She shouted.

"I'm fine, Mili," Subaru said, gesturing for her to keep her voice down. "Lye didn't even raise his hands. We actually had what probably qualifies as a friendly conversation in his warped mind."

"What did he say?"

"Well, he told me that Capella and Regulus still *really* want me dead," Subaru began. "He also told me that somehow I pocketed Roy's Authority after I killed him-"

"*What?!*" Emilia gasped.

Subaru shrugged. "I don't understand it either. If I *do* have it then I don't think I'm compatible with it. Anyway, Lye wanted me to give it to him. I told him I'd be willing to if he could meet my price."

"What's that?"

"I wasn't specific. I'm not sure I really want to give it to Lye anyway but I wanted him to think that we could make a deal so I offered to trade him the Authority for something of equal value."

Emilia bit her lip. "Subaru, maybe you should have just given it to him," She murmured.

Subaru looked at her incredulously. "What?!"

"Subaru, it's obvious that your own Authority is already damaging you when you call on it! Do you really think that you can contain two?! You should just give it to Lye."

Subaru sighed. "Look, Mili, I think that giving Lye anything that could theoretically make him stronger is a *really* bad idea. Beyond that, even if I *wanted* to give him the Authority, I don't have a clue how to do it!"

Emilia gave him a miserable look.

Subaru shook his head. "Anyway, I talked Lye into telling me about a way out of the city: a mining tunnel that leads outside."

"Really?!" Emilia's face brightened.

"Yeah but don't get your hopes up. The soldiers... they blew it up," Subaru sighed.

Emilia looked confused. "How did they-"

"Doesn't matter right now," Subaru shook his head. "What's important is that we can't use that route and we better get out of town quick or this box is just going to keep tightening on us. Hey, how did you get in here anyway?"

"I climbed the waterwheel," Emilia answered.

Subaru stared at her in horror.

"What?" Emilia asked.

"Emilia," Subaru said, clearly fighting for patience. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?!"

"*You* were in danger, Subaru," She reminded him.

"I don't care! I don't want you to be risking your life for *me*!" Subaru protested.

Emilia stared at him for a long moment and then rolled her eyes heavenward with a sigh. "Subaru, you can be

amazingly stupid," She said.

"What?! What did I say?!"

"Never mind," She sighed. "But when you and I get out of here, we need to have a very long talk."

Subaru tried to ask another question but Emilia shook her head. "Later, Subaru. Did Lye say anything else?"

"Actually yes. He claims... that the Witch Cult doesn't know much of anything about curses and doesn't use them. He claims that they didn't put the curse on you."

Emilia's face grew downcast. "Do you believe him?" She whispered.

"I don't know," Subaru admitted. "I mean, I don't think that he was *lying* but Lye isn't that bright either so you need to filter everything he tells you through the fact that he doesn't pay much attention to anything except his appetite. And frankly, Emilia, the fact that the Witch Cult might have been the ones to put this curse on you wasn't much of a lead anyway."

Subaru coughed. "Lye, also told me one more thing. He told me that he wanted me to take my seat... in the Witch Cult as the Sin Archbishop of Pride."

Emilia stared at him in shock.

"I declined, of course!" Subaru added hastily.

"Why did he want you to do that?!"

"I'm not sure. I got the impression that Lye... actually likes me," Subaru said awkwardly. "I think in some strange way he just wants his... 'buddy' to work with him..."

Emilia stared at him in disbelief.

Subaru chuckled. "Yeah. I feel the same way." He made a face. "Well, we're not going to accomplish anything just sitting here until we get caught. We need to find a way out of the city."

Emilia nodded.

Julius and Anri hid in the woods as the Gusteko soldiers searched for them.

"How did they find me?!" Anri demanded in a harsh whisper.

"I have no idea, Anri," Julius admitted. "These soldiers are technically invaders in Lagunica now, are they not?"

Anri rocked her hand back and forth. "Debatable. The kingdoms have never really agreed on where the border is. For all I know, we're already on the other side. And I still want to know how they found me. Nobody knew where we were hiding except for Subaru and Emilia and even they don't know where we were hiding in the woods."

"Perhaps by sheer chance?" Julius suggested. "If nothing else this does tend to add veracity to the claims of House Griest making territorial ambitions on Ganaks."

Anri gave Julius a skeptical look. "You keep saying that, Julius, but I still think that it's crazy. Malcolm an Griest is many things but he's not an utter fool! He doesn't have the strength to fight Lagunica alone and he knows it. He's not going to start a war unless he's certain that he has all of Gusteko behind him. If he was making those kind of alliances, I would have heard about it."

Julius just stared at her.

"What?"

Julius cleared his throat. "Lady Kairei," He said formally. "I wonder if it has dawned on you that perhaps he considers those alliances *fait accompli*."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your dispute with House Griest is purely an internal matter in Gusteko, is it not?"

"I suppose so."

"But now, Malcolm an Griest has evidence that you have recruited Subaru Natsuki, an asset from Lagunica to assist you. A person high ranking enough that he could be considered a voice for Lagunica's politics," Julius said, his voice growing chill as he mentioned Subaru.

"He doesn't have any evidence! He has hearsay!" Anri protested.

Julius hesitated. "But if Lagunica admits to Subaru Natsuki's wrongdoing in an effort to disavow him..."

Anri stared at him in horror. "You're right!" She whispered. "By working with Subaru and Emilia, I played right into Griest's hands. He'll have no trouble convincing the other Great Houses to view me as a quisling and a traitor. I've

sentenced my people to death!"

Julius winced. "Lady Kairei, please. You mustn't-"

There was a rustling in the surrounding undergrowth. More than sixty Gusteko soldiers emerged.

They were completely surrounded.

"Subaru, look at that!" Emilia gasped.

As the pair rode Patrasche discretely through Hightown, they saw a line of crystal lanterns on tall poles, bathing Hightown in a luminescence brilliance.

"That's so amazing," She whispered.

"Yeah, that is pretty cool," Subaru agreed as he guided Patrasche down the street.

Holy shit! This is awesome! They have magic street lights here.

...Isn't it weird that I find this impressive? I mean, back home every street had street lights. I guess I've finally gone native or something.

Huh. I wonder if I could make some lights like these for the village. The place would look beautiful with a little illumination. I bet I could make power lines and light bulbs with a little help from the spirits. We could decorate those enormous trees like my neighbors used to do at Christmas.

Actually, I really like that idea, although I'm not sure why. Maybe... just trying to find a way to contribute to the village? If it's going to be our home then I need to find some way to keep myself busy and help the people once they've been defrosted.

...I really shouldn't put it that way. It makes them sound like microwave dinners.

"There he is!" A shout came from behind them.

Subaru and Emilia spun around and saw a group of city guards on riding dragons patrolling the streets. At their head was General Brendig.

"Kill them!" The General roared.

"Shit!" Subaru shouted as he kicked Patarsche into a sprint.

"Subaru! I think I know a way out of here!" Emilia screamed.

"Fabulous!"

"But we need some big jugs of water!"

"Jugs of water?! What would we do with-"

"No time! We need to find water!"

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*. He cast his mind back to a man that they had seen while hiding. He'd been slowly driving a heavy wagon loaded with enormous jugs of water to fight the fire in Lowtown. Subaru contemplated where the man had been last, his speed and the direction he must be going in to reach Lowtown to calculate his current position.

Subaru left *Reason and Judgment* and pulled Patrasche to the left as they raced back that way while avoiding the General's riders.

"Mili!" He shouted. "There'll be a wagon full of water jugs coming up! We can't slow down so grab them as we ride past, OK?"

"Right!"

"How many do we need?" Subaru asked.

"...Four, I think?" Emilia said.

Oh man. I am developing serious misgivings about this plan...

The pair raced around a corner and Subaru saw the wagon right where he predicted. The driver jumped as Patrasche pounded by his wagon, close enough to touch. Subaru and Emilia both grabbed an amphora in each hand.

Subaru tried to pick up both heavy water jugs at once with a mighty heave. He felt like his arms were about to fall off, especially the weakened left one, but he managed to grab them both.

"OK!" Subaru yelled, trying to hold the jugs and Patrasche's reins. "Now what?"

"Up there!" Emilia shouted, pointing at a ramp that led up.

Subaru guided Patrasche and the dragon raced up the ramp onto the outer ramparts. General Brendig and his men followed close behind. Subaru took a quick look around, growing more concerned. "Mili! We're trapped! There's no way down except back that way!"

"Subaru! Do you see the water wheel?"

Subaru looked straight ahead and he did see the colossal waterwheel, turning ponderously in the almost dawn. "Yes...", He said in a sick voice.

"Ride straight toward it!"

"Mili! I don't like-"

"Subaru, trust me!"

Subaru sighed. "You just *had* to put like that, didn't you?" He whispered to himself.

Subaru directed Patrasche to charge toward the waterwheel at the edge of the wall. The riding dragon quickly turned and looked at Subaru incredulously and Subaru knew his expression must have been just as staggered when he looked back at the dragon.

Patrasche sighed and continued to thunder toward the edge.

"Subaru! When I say now, we need to throw these jugs toward the waterwheel as hard as we can?"

"What?!"

"Ready?!"

Subaru bit his lip and nodded.

"Now!" Emilia shouted throwing her jugs forward with her great strength.

Subaru bit off a curse and triggered *Indomitable*. Rather than punch the jugs, he placed both palms flat against the jugs and pushed them away as hard as he could. They both went flying out past the ramparts.

Emilia raised her hands and the four water jugs shattered. The water exploded out of the jugs and froze in mid air. Emilia's magic forcing the water to make a thin bridge of ice from the rampart edge to the waterwheel.

"Oh fuck!" Subaru whispered.

"Keep going!" Emilia screamed.

Subaru winced as he urged Patrasche on and fought the urge to close his eyes.

Patrasche raced out onto the frozen bridge which steadily cracked under the dragon's weight but she managed to reach the edge.

"Jump!" Emilia cried.

Subaru had no idea how to tell Patrasche to do that but in this case, the dragon needed no prompting. Patrasche leaped off the edge and landed on a water wheel paddle that was climbing toward the apex just as the ice bridge shattered.

Patarsche landed solidly on the waterwheel but the paddle had already started to tilt up behind her. Her claws struggled to find purchase as the paddle grew more steep.

"Mili," Subaru hissed in a tense whisper.

Emilia waved her hands and a thin stream of water broke from the massive waterfall and flew toward them and landed between the paddles where it froze to ice. It created an curved ramp between the two paddles just as the one they stood on started to pitch vertically.

Patarsched slid down the ramp and onto the flattening next paddle.

Subaru sighed in relief just before the three were pounded by a raging torrent as the paddle brought them under the waterfall and the riding dragon was driven to her knees by the force of the falling water.

The falls passed a moment later, leaving them all gasping for breath and Patrasche crying out in affront. The dragon slowly regained her feet but they were all soaking wet.

Subaru spat out some water. "Now what?" He asked Mili, panting for breath.

Emilia shrugged and gestured down.

Subaru looked at the paddle they were on started to tilt down and the soaking wet Patrasche simply slid down the paddle and jumped the last ten feet to hand heavily on her claws on the soft dirt.

Behind them, they could hear Brendig screaming in fury.

"Emilia," Subaru gasped. "Are you OK?"

Emilia lay slumped against his shoulder. Subaru felt her nod. I'm alright, Subaru," She whispered. "Just... very tired..."

The trio panted there for a moment then Subaru nudged Patrasche into a run. "Come on, girl. Let's not give them time to come down here and start chasing us again!"

Patrasche took off and just as the sun rose, Subaru guided her toward the farm house where Anri waited.

"Emilia," Subaru sighed. "That was absolutely insane! I don't think I've ever been that scared in my entire life!"

Emilia slowly caught her breath. "Don't worry, Subaru... I wouldn't... let you fall..."

"I wasn't worried about me, I was worried about you! Please don't put yourself in danger that way again. My heart stops when I think that something might happen to you."

Emilia actually chuckled. "Welcome... to *my* life."

Julius drew his sword and stood protectively in front of Anri.

Anri counted heads. There were at least sixty soldiers ringing the clearing and more were appearing behind them.

"Princess Kairei," The officer in command mocked. "How lovely to see you again. Prince Malcolm has been simply worried sick during your absence."

"I can only imagine," Anri said in a clipped tone.

"The prince offers you his hospitality in what must be a most difficult time for your people," The officer continued.

"And what if the princess chooses not to accept your 'hospitality?'" Julius snapped.

The officer thought about it for a moment, stroking his chin. "I think that I'd really have to insist."

Julius drew himself up straight. "I am Julius Juukulus, 'the Finest Knight' of Lagunica. I shall not permit you to offer offense to Lady Kairei's person. My skills as a combatant are feared throughout the kingdom. I will not hesitate to fight your entire brigade and I shall emerge victorious."

Maybe he could normally, Anri thought. *But he told me that his magic has been crippled and I'm not sure how much of it he has. Worse, this officer looks he's never heard of Julius anyway and thinks he's just bluffing.*

Anri shut her eyes. *There's no point. I did my best but I lost the game. My life is forfeit anyway but there's no reason for Julius to die too. If surrender maybe they'll let Julius live. Maybe they'll even show mercy on the people of Siros. If my House is extinct then Griest should have no quarrel with my people...*

Mother, forgive me, but I'm almost glad that you're not here to see this...

After four centuries of pride and valor for House Ithil, I will oversee its final dissolution...

"Captain!" Anri's voice rang out. "If I surrender, will you permit this knight to return to his home?"

"Princess!" Julius objected.

"You're hardly in a position to negotiate, Princess," The officer said skeptically. He thought for a moment. "Then again, this knight means nothing to me. If you surrender, I will spare him."

Anri took a deep breath and nodded.

She held her head high and began to walk toward the officer.

Julius grabbed her arm. "Princess! We can fight our way out!"

Anri gave him a sad smile. "Sir Julius, your courage is staggering but I'm afraid that I have my doubts that even you can win this fight. There is no point in both of us dying today. I have often been a very foolish girl, Sir Julius. I have led my people to disaster but I am still a princess and I am not afraid to meet my end. Would you perhaps do me a favor, Sir Julius?"

"Name it, my Lady!" Julius swore.

"If you should see Subaru and Emilia again, please assure them this was not their fault. I know them well enough to be certain that they will blame themselves. Also please extend my apologies that I will be unable to assist them in breaking the Lady Emilia's curse."

Julius's mouth moved but he said nothing.

Anri flashed him half a grin. "You're a good guy, Julius," She said informally, "I really wish that we'd had more time to get to know one another better."

Anri shook off Julius's grip and she walked over to the officer with her head high. She made no sound nor flinched when the officer put her unbroken arm in chains.

The officer looked very pleased with himself. "Seize the knight," He commanded indifferently.

The soldiers moved toward Julius.

Anri started. "But you said-!"

"I lied," The officer shrugged. "My, you are an innocent one. A Lagunican knight's presence is confirmation of your treachery and your dealings with the decadent southerners. My Prince will be most pleased when I present the two of you to him."

"Julius! Run!" Anri urged.

Julius scowled at the men but he didn't resist when they seized his sword and bound him in chains.

"Julius, why-" Anri continued.

"Because I would have hurt you in retaliation," The officer said in a bored voice. "You really have no comprehension of how the world works, do you? I truly feel sorry for whomever tried to follow your lead."

Anri took that comment like a slap in the face.

Julius was marched up to the princess in heavy chains, his face was grim but it had no accusation in it.

Anri bowed her head as the soldiers marched them both away.

Subaru and Emilia rode up to the abandoned farm house.

"Anri!" Subaru shouted.

No one answered.

Subaru and Emilia shared a worried look.

"Anri?!" Subaru raised his voice louder. "We should really get out of here right now!"

"Subaru, look over there," Emilia pointed to a spot of disturbed dirt not far from the house.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and scanned the area. "There was a fight here," Subaru muttered. "Many men attacking one."

"Anri?!" Emilia gasped.

"No! No, not Anri," Subaru reassured her. "The tracks are much too big."

Subaru studied them. "They go this way," He mused, nudging Patrasche forward along the trail. "Here. These are Anri's tracks."

"What happened to her?" Emilia demanded.

"I think that... Anri tried to rescue whoever was being attacked."

"That does sound like her," Emilia mourned. "The two of you both really need a stern talking to..."

Subaru followed the trail and found... bodies. Dozens of bodies all wearing Lagunican uniforms.

"Anri!" Emilia gasped.

"She's not here, Mili!" Subaru cut her off quickly. "We still need to find her."

Subaru kept following the tracks, slipping in and out of *Reason and Judgment* to keep on the trail. "Looks like they ran this way?"

Patrasche slowly pushed through the brush and entered a clearing. Subaru reined in and studied the markings. "Anri and whoever were here for a while," He said. "Anri was pacing around. I'm guessing that she escaped her pursuers and didn't know what to do next."

Subaru's gaze followed the tracks and he nudged Patrasche into motion.

A few minutes later they broke into another clearing. "OK, more pacing," Subaru said. "But this time there are a lot of tracks. I'm guessing that her pursuers found her again. She and her buddy ran... this way!"

Subaru lightly kicked Patrasche and the dragon burst back into the woods, following the trail.

They entered into a large clearing that was carpeted with moss.

"Oh shit," Subaru grumbled.

"How are we going to find tracks in this?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shook his head. "We'll have to check the entire underbrush until we find some!"

Anri and Julius were marched north, surrounded by soldiers and her spirits felt as heavy as lead.

Don't break down, Anri. Don't give into despair. They don't deserve the satisfaction.

"Captain," Anri said. "Would you mind satisfying my curiosity?"

"You're going back to Prince Malcolm's army which is currently marching toward the Valley of the Winds," The captain smirked. He'd been patting himself on the back ever since he'd captured Anri.

"Yes, very interesting," Anri replied in a bored tone. "But that wasn't my question. I wanted to know how you found me."

The captain laughed. "I'd guess inside help. Apparently, some of your people are a bit dissatisfied with your leadership. Prince Malcolm has been getting very accurate information about everything Sanshi is doing as well as your own activities."

Anri frowned. "That's not possible," She shook her head.

The captain snorted. "Why? Because your people love you so much that they would never turn against you?" He asked sarcastically.

"No, it's because I haven't had contact with any of my people in weeks," Anri replied. "You must have gotten the information some other way."

The captain looked annoyed. "All I know is that the the Prince told us where to find you," He growled. "I don't know how he knew. We followed our instructions and there you were."

Anri turned away. *How is that possible? Everyone I've had contact with in the past few weeks is dead! The only survivor is Victoire. I'm not going to act like there's no way that Victoire would ever betray me, I don't know her all that well and royalty can't afford to have those kind of blind spots anyway. But even if Victoire did turn on me, how did this work? Victoire thought that Subaru, Emilia, and I were all going to Ganaks. If she had sold me out she would have told them to look in Ganaks not at the farmhouse.*

Subaru and Emilia wouldn't have had any chance to turn me in even if they'd wanted to. And they're the only ones who knew that I was hiding at that farmhouse.

Wait a second. This gets even weirder. They didn't look for me at the farmhouse. They found me in the middle of the gods-forsaken, trackless woods! Nobody could have told them that I'd be there at such and such a time. I didn't even know that I'd be there!

The only person who could have told any of Griest's soldiers where I was was Julius and he never had a chance!

And yet they found me twice, as easily as if I'd lit a signal fire.

Anri continued to march, her thoughts chasing one another in circles.

In a way, she was grateful. It was a good distraction from wondering what Malcolm an Griest would do to her.

By lunchtime, Patrasche had broken through from the forest and was thundering north along a road.

Subaru saw a valley in the distance. The valley was large, broad and shallow. The woods ended by the valley edges and the valley was carpeted in a vast ocean of tall grass, much of it nearly six feet high. There was an army camp being assembled in one of the few areas of the valley clear of tall grass.

The pair raced to the edge and dropped down on their stomachs to avoid detection. They peered down into the valley.

"Anri!" Emilia whispered pointing down into the camp.

Subaru looked down and saw Anri being marched in chains through the camp, accompanied by a tall man in a hood.

"Subaru, she's already reached the enemy army," Emilia whispered in a dead voice.

"We're too late," Subaru sighed.

***Chapter 22*: Chapter 22**

"Princess Kairei," Malcolm an Griest said in oddly dolorous tones when Anri was presented to him in his command tent. "What a wonderful, unexpected surprise."

Deann sipped her tea. "Honestly, Father, it makes the entire matter of bring all of these men out to fight seem somewhat redundant, does it not?"

"True," Malcolm admitted. "But it serves as proof of the power of our House."

"Tell me, Prince Malcolm, what precisely makes you think that it is a good idea to attack Lagunica with this army?" Anri asked.

Malcolm stared at her incredulously. "What are you talking about?"

"Apparently, several members of the armed forces in Lagunica have come to the conclusion that this army is aimed at their throat."

Duncan stared at Anri in horror. "My lord, what if your actions were misinterpreted?! If Lagunica thinks that we truly mean to attack-"

"Cow chips!" Malcolm snapped. "Lagunica won't respond as long as we do not cross into their territory. I expected more from a Princess of the realm than such ludicrous stories!"

"Why does no one ever believe me?" Anri sighed to herself.

Deann gave Duncan a worried look. "Father, what shall we do with her?" Deann asked finally.

"Canmore is unbetrothed," Duncan suggested quickly.

Anri gave a mirthless laugh. "He was a good boy when last we met. He must be nearly seven now, yes?"

"Almost ten actually," Deann replied. "I agree, Father. It would be the easiest way to end this war. And it would clearly establish Griest as dominant over Ithil."

Malcolm scratched his black and gray beard. "No," He decided. "I have higher aspirations for Canmore than this. One day he shall be Holy King." Malcolm's face became grave. "I'm afraid that you have caused too much trouble, Princess Kairei. You have undermined the natural order in Gusteko-"

"I have threatened your hegemony, you mean!" Anri said with a defiant shake of her head.

Malcolm glowered at her and sighed. "Princess Kairei, you have conspired with Lagunica to weaken our nation! Your House is a disgrace to Gusteko and this can not be borne. Unfortunate though it may be, I require that your House become extinct. But I will show mercy on the people of your province. This is the best that I can do."

"What about Gael?!" Anri said sharply.

Malcolm hesitated.

"Prince Malcolm," Anri said desperately. "You know that Gael is *no* threat to you! He will never enter politics and he is likely to never have a child to continue his line. Let him have a peaceful life away from all of this!" Anri almost begged.

"I agree, Prince Malcolm," Duncan added unexpectedly. "Gael is no threat to you and you will gain much more respect for showing mercy in this case than completing a bloody victory against someone who can't fight back."

Malcolm sighed. "Very well then. Gael will be permitted to live. Tomorrow we will continue our march to the border and make our threats against Lagunica. Following the completion of this mission, this we will lay siege to Siros and demand Regent Radu's surrender. Then you will be executed."

Everyone in the room seemed somewhat morose at that statement.

"Tomorrow, Father?" Deann asked in surprise. "Isn't it... rather very early in the day to make a camp for the night?"

Duncan shrugged. "We've already made camp to wait for the Princess, Lady Deann. I must admit that I do not relish the idea of breaking down the camp, marching another two miles and then setting up camp again for the night."

Deann made a face. "Good point."

"Moreover, we're still expecting the remaining forces of Brokvar, Hilde, Craite, and Voivode. We told them that we would await them here," Malcolm reminded her.

Deann nodded.

Malcolm gestured to the soldiers guarding the princess. "Take the Princess away. Guard her well."

"I will bring her back to her cell," Duncan volunteered.

Malcolm nodded and waved dismissively.

Duncan took Anri's chain and gently lead her out of the tent.

The two walked in silence to another tent not far away. Duncan led Anri inside to where they found a large cage. Julius was locked in a similar cage next to hers. The knight glowered at Duncan but he said nothing.

Duncan opened it and Anri stepped inside without a word.

Duncan locked it behind her.

Duncan stared at Anri, his face twisted in dismay. "I... I don't quite know what to say, Anri."

Anri didn't respond.

Duncan shook his head. "I will continue to speak to Prince Malcolm tonight," He promised. "I will endeavor to make him see reason. Your marriage to Canmore is the only sensible end to this mess!"

Anri gave a tired chuckle. "Do you think there is *any* chance that he will listen to you?" Anri asked archly.

Duncan bowed his head in sorrow.

"Duncan," Anri said slowly. "After I... die... I am very worried about Gael. He'll... need someone to watch over him."

Duncan nodded fervently. "You need have no fear for Gael. I will keep him safe from all harm and he will die of a ripe old age. Even if it costs me my life!"

Anri sighed. "Thank you, Duncan. That is a great comfort to me," She murmured.

Duncan bit his lip. "Anri, I... I *never* wanted things to come to this..."

"I know, Duncan," She sighed. "I hold you blameless for this end. Nor do I begrudge you your loyalty to House Griest."

"Is there... anything I could bring you?" He asked plaintively. "Something to make your evening more comfortable?"

Anri thought for a moment. "There is one thing," She admitted.

"Name it!"

Anri silently pointed to a table nearby that had a small knife resting on top of it.

Duncan's face twisted in horror. "No, Anri!"

"Princess!" Julius gasped.

"Duncan," She said kindly. "I am already dead. All the forces of Siros couldn't rescue me from an army this size. Let me die my way. Don't let me be led back to Siros in chains and publicly executed to break whatever is left of my people's spirits."

Duncan's face was mournful and his body trembled as he slowly took the knife and handed it to Anri.

Anri smiled at him. "Thank you, Duncan. I depart this world in good conscious, knowing that you will see to my brother's safety."

Duncan's eyes streamed tears. "You should... wait a while," He whispered. "Wait until everyone goes to sleep or someone will certainly find your bleeding body in time to heal you..."

Anri nodded. "Thank you, Duncan. You've always been a good friend to my family."

Duncan's face twisted, a dozen different emotions playing over his face. He searched for the right words to say and couldn't find them. Finally he snapped a salute and turned around, exiting the tent, his eyes streaming tears.

The pair looked down into the valley and their hearts sank.

"We can't just give up, Subaru!" Emilia said. "We have to help her!"

Subaru shook his head. "There have got to be ten thousand men in that valley," Subaru whispered.

Emilia watched Subaru looking all over the valley, deep in thought. His eyes seemed to flicker.

Emilia looked away, staring at the forest behind them and she stiffened.

She sprang to her feet and dashed into the forest in a blur.

Subaru's head snapped around. "Emilia!" he shouted.

He heard a struggle in the woods and he drew his rapier, running after her.

As they approached, Emilia stepped out of the woods, effortlessly holding a struggling person. He was barely more than a boy and he was wearing a brown uniform.

"Well well," Subaru muttered, slashing his rapier through the air. "What have we here?"

The boy clenched his lips, symbolizing that he wouldn't talk.

"I want to know about that camp, kid," Subaru growled.

"Hold fast!" Another voice shouted as dozens of men in the same uniform emerged from the forest with swords drawn. The leader was a grizzled old man with a bushy mustache.

Subaru and Emilia drew closer together. She summoned her ice sword but she didn't release the struggling soldier, holding him with one arm.

"Listen, buddy," Subaru growled. "I *am* going to rescue Anri and you really don't want to get in my way. So tell me everything you know about that camp or I'll start cutting the information out of the lot of you, bit by bit!"

The leader looked confused and Subaru raised his rapier before the officer's eyes so that he could look at it. "I'm not

kidding and I don't have much time to waste here. Tell us about the camp!"

The officer gasped. "Where did you get that rapier?!" He demanded.

Subaru frowned, thrown off step. "It was given to me by a friend whom I intend to rescue so you had better tell me everything you know about your camp right now!"

The officer just stared at Subaru in confusion.

"You're troops from *Siros*, aren't you?" Emilia asked.

The officer hesitated then finally nodded. "We were accompanying a caravan of forty wagons bringing goods south to Ganaks to trade for supplies on the orders of Regent Radu. One of my scouts reported a large detachment of men in this area and we came to investigate and confirm if the area was still safe for us to pass through."

"Listen," Subaru urged. "We're here to rescue Princess Anri! Can you help us?!"

"Anri?" The officer repeated in confusion. "Wait. You mean Princess... Kairei?!"

Subaru closed his eyes with a sigh. "I fucking *hate* Gusteko names. Yes! Whatever. She's down there in that camp and I want to save her!"

"The princess has been captured?!" The officer gasped.

"Is there any way that you can bring reinforcements here quickly?" Subaru asked. "Maybe enough for a night raid? If we could catch them by surprise then we might have a chance."

The officer slumped and shook his head. "There's nobody else for at least a day's march. I only have fifty men and we are not warriors. We've been sent to escort goods to Ganaks! We weren't expected to engage in a fight!"

"Fighting would be fairly futile in any case," Emilia muttered, letting go of the boy who stumbled away from her. "As we're outnumbered about two hundred to one."

"Officer..." Subaru prompted.

"My name is Captain Antilles," The grizzled officer answered.

"What kind of goods are you transporting? Anything useful?" Subaru asked.

The captain thought for a moment. "Our cargo consists of two hundred pounds of wassabi, four hundred yards of silk, three hundred pounds of ginger, three thousand gallons of sesame seed oil, four hundred pounds of frankincense, and six hundred pounds of cinnamon," The officer said, sounding slightly embarrassed.

"Nothing useful then," Subaru sighed.

"Why are you carrying so many spices?" Emilia asked.

The captain looked at Emilia askance, noting her hair and ears, but ultimately he said, "The trade routes to Kararagi have been closed for some time but we managed to sneak some goods over the border and through the enemy lines. Regent Radu commanded us to bring the goods to Lagunica where spices fetch a high demand and we can bring back a substantial amount of food to Siros in exchange."

Subaru sighed. "Perhaps we could offer Malcolm an Griest seasonings for his supper in exchange for Anri's life," Subaru muttered.

"Subaru, that's not helping," Emilia chided.

Subaru thought for a long moment.

"Captain," Subaru said finally. "Will you help us try to rescue the Princess?"

Antilles hesitated. "Our lives are pledged to House Ithil," He said finally. "If by my life or death I can save the Princess, I will do so. But I require some possibility of success. I won't order my men to throw their lives away for a lost cause."

"Fair enough," Subaru nodded.

"Might I know your names?" Captain Antilles voice was not quite friendly and Subaru struggled to ignore the way that he was looking at Emilia with raw suspicion.

"This is my fiancée, the Lady Emilia," Subaru said quietly.

Emilia gave a slight curtsy.

"I'm Subaru Natsuki," He finished.

Captain Antilles recoiled. "The Butcher of Arlem?!"

The soldiers around them trembled.

Emilia scowled at Antilles and Subaru face-palmed.

"Separate conversation!" Subaru said quickly. "Look, the whole Arlem thing is a bullshit story that got blown way out of proportion! Right now the only thing I want to do is to rescue the princess. I think we can all agree on this?" Subaru asked with an edge in his voice.

Emilia nodded immediately, Antilles and his soldiers nodded more slowly but they did nod.

"Captain, come and take a look at the camp. Maybe some strategy will present itself."

Subaru, Emilia, and Captain Antilles looked over the edge into the shallow valley. The other soldiers hid in the forest nearby.

"This is not just a Sanshi army," Antilles murmured. "I see flags from House Craite, House Brokvar, House Hilde, and even House Voivode!" He said in astonishment. "Those freaks of nature drink the blood of the dead!"

"I don't really care about their eating habits right now," Subaru muttered.

"I sense spirits down there," Emilia whispered. "Powerful spirits."

Once Emilia had mention it, Subaru noticed several tiny balls of light drifting through the camp.

Antilles nodded. "Gusteko magic is heavily spirit arts based. We use spirits in combat the same way as Lagunica relies on elemental spell craft."

Subaru frowned. "Can anyone guess where Anri would be being held?"

"There," Antilles said with authority, pointing at a large tent.

"How are you so certain?" Emilia asked.

Antilles gave her an unsettled look. "Prison tents always have guards. That is the only tent with guards standing at post."

Subaru nodded. "Good point," He murmured, staring at the tent. "Well, it's pretty close to the edge of the camp, surprisingly."

Emilia frowned. "We *might* be able to sneak in there and rescue Anri," She said dubiously.

"Maybe," Subaru admitted. "*If* we had a distraction. We'd need to persuade anyone patrolling the perimeter to be elsewhere for us to have a chance."

"What about the guards at the tent?" Emilia asked.

"Hopefully, we wouldn't even need to deal with them," Subaru replied. "It's a tent. You can make a door anywhere you want with a sharp knife."

"Regardless," Antilles interjected. "I think it would be naive to assume that an alarm will not be sounded quickly."

Subaru nodded. "There's some very tall grass in this valley. That should provide cover for us to sneak up to the camp. It might even cover our escape."

"I doubt that you will be so fortunate," Antilles disagreed. "Look there!" He pointed.

They all looked and saw a group of people standing outside the largest tent. Most of them were grizzled old men with the demeanor of senior officers. Three of them were wearing red capes and looked like nobility. There was an enormous man with a short black beard, a slender young woman with dark hair wearing a green robe, and a heavily muscled young man.

"Those are three of the Acolyte Knights," Antilles whispered.

"The what?" Subaru asked.

"The elite warriors of Gusteko," Antilles said grimly.

Subaru frowned. "Are those like the equivalent of Royal Knights?"

"Essentially, yes," Antilles replied.

Subaru sighed. "Alright. This complicates matters. I don't want to have to fight three 'Juliuses.'"

"Fight what?" Antilles asked in confusion.

Subaru shook his head. "Forget it. Alright, so if we can distract the guards long enough to grab Anri and make a break for it, we'll almost certainly have an alarm sounded before we can clear the valley."

Antilles nodded. "Indeed, and this is a problem. One Acolyte Knight would be capable of smashing through my men all by themselves."

Subaru frowned. "Well, that's just great!"

"The 4th and 5th ranked Acolyte Knights are in that valley," Antilles said. "I can see Prince Malcolm and Griest, his daughter Lady Deann, and her 'student' Duncan."

"Student?" Subaru asked, picking up on the way the word was emphasized.

"Sir Duncan is not technically an Acolyte Knight," Antilles explained. "He has been an apprentice of Lady Deann for nearly a decade. The reality is that he could end his studies at any time and he is already more formidable than most Acolyte Knights. However, he is in love with Lady Deann. Prince Malcolm will not give his approval for their marriage so they maintain their teacher-student relationship to allow them to remain together."

"Clever," Subaru admitted.

"Sir Duncan is called 'the Unshakable,'" Antilles continued. "He specializes in a highly defensive style of fighting. He's been known to wade into whole crowds of foes and then calmly walk out without a scratch," Antilles continued. "Lady Deann is an incredible sword fighter who uses twin short swords in combat. She claims to be able to slice a man to ribbons before he even realizes that she drew her sword. Prince Malcolm is the strongest Acolyte Knight of those here assembled. He is able to draw a vast amount of power from his spirit partners to enhance his own strength and speed."

"Spirit partners?" Subaru said sharply.

Antilles looked at him puzzled. "Yes, Acolyte Knights draw their magic from the spirits. They're all Spirit Knights."

Subaru frowned and thought hard.

"Subaru, what is it?" Emilia murmured.

Antilles was shaking his head. "Unless we can deal with the Acolyte Knights, the power of the army is irrelevant and escape would be impossible."

"Captain," Subaru said slowly. "Let's... just assume for the moment that I can handle the Acolyte Knights..."

"Do you think you can?" Antilles said in surprise. "I've heard that you're called 'the Invincible' but can you truly take on such odds?"

Subaru hesitated. "Let's just pretend for a moment that I can," Subaru murmured. "I think that I might have a plan."

"What is it, Subaru?" Emilia asked eagerly.

"Hang on, give me a minute to polish it," Subaru replied. "Captain, if our idea has hope to rescue the princess, are you willing to help us?"

Antilles nodded slowly. "I'll want to hear your plan first," He said pointedly. "But if it is sound then my men and I are prepared to risk our lives to save the Princess."

"If I've got this right, nobody in your unit needs to risk their lives," Subaru replied. "Can you give me and Emilia a few minutes to polish this idea?"

Antilles nodded, standing up and brushing the dirt off his clothes. "I'll go brief my men."

Subaru and Emilia watched him slip away.

Subaru gestured back toward the forest. "Let's talk where we won't be overheard."

Emilia nodded and they walked a few hundred yards back into the trees.

"What's the plan?" Emilia whispered.

"OK, so I learned a new trick today... yesterday... Fuck, I don't know any more. Mili, when was the last time that we slept?!" Subaru mourned.

"Later, Subaru," She said firmly. "What's the plan?"

"OK. So when I was fighting Julius, I discovered that my *Pridebreaker* ability can do more than control mabeasts. It can also control spirits!"

Emilia's eyes widened. "No wonder the spirits always panicked when you used it!"

"Yup. That's probably why. Anyway, when I fought Julius, I took away his spirits but I couldn't figure out how to use them."

"Did you ever use Beatrice's magic?" Emilia asked.

"Um. No, not really," Subaru admitted. "If magic needed to be used, she basically just did it herself. I thought of Beatrice as more of a little sister than a partner in combat."

Emilia nodded. "When things settle down, I'll have to give you a few lessons in spirit arts."

"Worry about that later," Subaru said dismissively. "Anyway, if these three are all spirit knights and if I take their spirits away, they should be crippled."

"With *Indomitable*, you should be able to defeat them easily," Emilia nodded.

Subaru winced. "Um. Emilia, that's the other thing. Apparently, while I'm using *Pridebreaker* to control the spirits... I can't use *Indomitable*."

"What?!"

"Yeah, I was pretty upset to find out too," Subaru replied. "Also, remember that I was *in* a fight when I figured this out."

"But if you couldn't use *Indomitable* then how did you fight Julius?" Emilia said, looking aghast.

Subaru sighed. "I think dumb luck had a lot to do with it," He admitted.

Emilia shook her head in disbelief. "You tried to fight one of the best duelists in the kingdom and you didn't even have any magic?!" She asked incredulously.

"It wasn't my idea!" Subaru protested. "Look, the point is that if I use *Pridebreaker* on them, they won't be any good for fighting."

"But neither will you!" Emilia reminded him.

"Hey! I beat Julius, didn't I?" Subaru reminded her.

Emilia did not look reassured.

Subaru sighed. "Look, I might not even have to deal with them in the first place. If my plan works then we'll panic everybody and they'll run for the hills."

Emilia folded her arms across her chest. "Alright, so what is this plan?"

Subaru sighed. "So first, we're going to need a distraction."

Emilia shook her head. "There are only fifty soldiers, Subaru. I don't think that would be much of a distraction."

Subaru snorted. "It wouldn't be any kind of distraction! Any competent commander would realize that nobody is going to attack ten thousands men with fifty! They'd know it was just a distraction and start looking everywhere for the other shoe to drop. And that's even ignoring the fact that none of the men who formed our distraction would survive!"

"Then what's our distraction?"

"We'll head back to the forest and gather up the mabeasts that I... tamed or whatever you want to call it. We'll bring them back here and use them to menace the camp. A horde of mabeasts will attract a lot of attention from the soldiers. I'll tell them to play cat and mouse and try to lure the soldiers out."

"Alright," Emilia nodded.

"While that's going on, you and I will sneak into the camp from the rear and rescue Anri. Then we'll flee into the tall grass and make our escape, hopefully before anyone sees us."

Emilia looked dubious. "I don't know, Subaru. This plan seems like it will take an awful lot of luck."

Subaru nodded. "I know. That's why we're going to have to assume that the army will be hot on our heels. While we're gathering up the mabeasts, I'm going to tell the soldiers to start painting the tall grass in the far part of the field with sesame seed oil."

Emilia blinked, looking confused.

Subaru smirked. "Sesame seed oil makes a ton of smoke when it catches fire, Mili. My mom used to cook with it from time to time. Usually badly," He added. "We'll have Antilles's men standing by to ignite the field with fire arrows as soon as we get clear. When the sesame seed oil burns, it will start to smoke intensely. The fire probably won't spread very much, I doubt that grass is really dry enough to burn and sesame seed oil isn't much of an accelerant but the soldiers in the field are going to be disoriented and gasping for breath and dodging brush fires. They'll give up the chase and we can get away!"

Emilia thought it over and then slowly nodded. "That makes sense, but what about the Acolyte Knights? Do you really think that we can lose them that easily?"

Subaru shrugged. "If we can't then I'll use *Pridebreaker* on them and then I'll fight them."

It's going to be three on one without Indomitable. Can I actually win this fight...

"We'll fight them," Emilia corrected.

Subaru blinked. "What?! No!"

Emilia stared at him incredulously. "Excuse me?! Subaru, I am *not* going to let you fight three powerful knights all by yourself!" Emilia said.

Subaru just stared at her for a long moment. "Emilia, you can't fight these guys! These are trained warriors! Killers!"

Emilia blinked in surprise and then her expression turned outraged. "I fought the Bowel Hunter!"

"And you almost died!" Subaru remind her.

"You nearly died fighting her too, if you recall!" She retorted.

Subaru took a deep breath and fought for calm. "Emilia. You don't have any training at fighting."

Emilia threw up her hands in exasperation. "Neither do you, Subaru! Since when did you let that hold *you* back?!"

Subaru sighed. "Look, Emilia-"

"Subaru, if you're going to try to tell me to just sit back and watch while you fight three knights alone and *without your magic* then you can just save it!" Emilia snapped.

Subaru thought for a moment and took a deep breath. "Emilia, listen," Subaru said in a placating voice.

"Subaru," She said firmly. "You are about to go into a fight with your life on the line. Yours *and* Anri's! You can't really expect me to just sit by and watch!"

"Well, what if I get flanked or something?" Subaru asked uncertainly. "I'll need someone to stay behind and watch my back!"

Emilia's face was stony. She folded her arms across her chest. "Subaru. Please don't tell me that you really thought I was dumb enough to fall for *that*."

Subaru threw his hands in the air. "OK, fine! I'm trying to protect you. I'm trying to keep you out of the fight because I'm afraid you'll get hurt again," He said earnestly.

Emilia scowled at him. "I can take care of myself!" she protested. "I'm not just... baggage that you have to carry around!"

Subaru sighed. "Mili!" Subaru said in exasperation. "I don't have time for this! We're working against the clock here! We'll have to talk about this later. We don't-"

Emilia cut him off. "I'm just as competent in a dangerous situation as you are, Subaru!" She said with a defiant toss of her head.

"Mili-"

Emilia wasn't listening. "Maybe better! I'm stronger, faster, and have more endurance than you! And that's not even counting my magic. And *my* magic doesn't have a five second time limit!"

"Mili-"

"Ever since we left the Sanctuary, I've been pulling my own weight, Subaru! And I want you to acknowledge that!"

Subaru slapped his palm against his forehead. "No, you haven't been, Mili!" He shouted. "Alright?! I'm not sure if this ever dawned on you but every time you *try* to fight, you just make things worse! Remember cursing me and Felt when you tried to fight Lye? Remember almost dying to Elsa and making me and Anri go find medicine to save your life?! Every time that you try to fight you just make a bigger mess for me to clean up!"

Emilia looked Subaru full in the face. Her anger had faded and in its place was an expression of such surprise and hurt that it nearly stopped Subaru's heart.

Subaru clapped a hand over his mouth in shock.

Emilia shook her head. "You... really don't respect me at all, do you, Subaru?" She whispered.

Subaru looked horrified at himself. "Emilia. I *didn't* mean that," He swore.

Emilia glowered at him. "Yes, you did. You were finally honest with me about how you really feel. For once!" Emilia snapped, her face livid.

"Emilia, I'm sorry," Subaru said fervently. "I was angry and I wasn't thinking and I didn't mean what I said!"

Emilia just shook her head, grinding her teeth. "Everything," She snarled. "It was all for nothing! I might as well have not have even bothered to try!"

"Emilia! I'm *sorry*!" Subaru begged, reaching out for her.

Emilia pushed him away. "Don't touch me! Everything that I've done since we split up in the capitol... it was all for nothing. It was a waste of time. Roswaal... was right about everything!"

Subaru blinked. "Roswaal?! What does Roswaal have to do with anything?"

Emilia whirled on Subaru, blazing fury in her eyes. "Roswaal convinced me to separate from you because he said that was the only way that I could convince you that I could do things for myself! He told me that you saw me as helpless and pathetic. I believed him. I went with him when we left the capitol to try and prove that I could be more than that!"

Subaru frowned trying to puzzle out what Emilia was trying to say.

Emilia looked away and her face grew morose. "We were trapped in the Sanctuary and I just... I wanted to die. Everyone could see how worthless I was. How helpless. I couldn't do anything to save hundreds of other lives. I couldn't do anything even to save my *own* life," Emilia whispered to herself. She turned to Subaru and gave him a look of contempt. "Then you told me that you believed in me. You said that you knew that I could do it," She sneered. "But it was just words, wasn't it? You never really believed that I could do *anything*! You're just like Daddy!"

"What are you talking about?!" Subaru said, completely lost.

Emilia turned her face away, snarling very bad words under her breath.

He shook his head violently. "Emilia! I... I don't understand! What are you trying to say?"

Emilia took several deep breaths and finally she turned to glower at Subaru. "Subaru, I went to the Sanctuary to show that I was someone who should be respected. I fought through those horrible trials to try and prove that!" She snapped.

Subaru hesitated. "But you are! Emilia, you *did* complete the trials! You saved everyone in the Sanctuary! I know that people's memories have been twisted but as soon as we fix that, everyone will remember you. They'll *all* know that you really are a hero! They'll all think of you as someone worthy of respect and admiration. I promise!"

Emilia shook her head violently and stamped her foot. "Subaru, you are *so* incredibly stupid!"

"What did I say?!" Subaru asked helplessly.

"Subaru! I wanted *you* to respect me! That's why I did all of this! I wanted to prove that I was someone worthy of *your* respect!"

"I do respect you, Emilia!" Subaru protested.

"No, you *don't*, Subaru! You don't think that I can handle the dangers in our lives. You don't see me as a equal or a partner! You're just like Daddy! You don't think that I can do anything!"

"That is *not* true," Subaru refuted immediately. "I *know* how much you can do. I watched how hard you worked every day since we met. I watched you talk to people who thought that your ears and hair made you a devil and convinced them to give you a chance. I watched you fight your way through the Sanctuary trials. I watched you endure the loss of Puck and all our friends. You are a hero, Emilia. You are the person I most admire in two worlds and I'll never see you as any less than that," He said firmly.

Emilia gave him a hard look. "But you still won't let me fight with you."

"No."

Emilia bared her teeth at him.

Subaru spread his arms wide. "Look, Emilia, I refuse to feel *guilty* about this! I love you! I want you to be safe! It's not a bad thing that I'm trying to protect you. I want you to be safe even if I can't be. I want you to get away even if I can't," He paused. "I want you to be happy even if it means that I can't be there to share it with you," He said quietly.

Emilia's scowl faded just slightly. "How could I ever be happy without you?" She muttered.

Subaru shook his head. "Emilia," He began.

Emilia raised her head imperiously. "Subaru, if you won't let me fight beside you, I'll interpret it as you saying that you never really loved me," She said in a deathly whisper.

Subaru flinched and stared at Emilia wide eyed. "What... How... How could you even say that?" He whispered.

Emilia took a deep breath. "Subaru, I *need* your respect," Emilia said firmly. "If you can love me but not respect me then I don't want either one. I'm looking for a partner in my life not just another caretaker. I don't want a husband who feels like he always needs to protect me. I want someone who knows that I'll always be there to help and support him the same way as I want him to help and support me."

Subaru hesitated and took a deep breath. "Mili, you fighting in this battle will put you in incredible danger! Can you even imagine how I would feel if something happened to you?!"

Emilia stared at him in astonishment for a long time and then she clenched her teeth and rolled her eyes skyward. "Subaru! You are so unbelievably selfish and stupid!" She screamed.

"Excuse me?!"

"Of course I can imagine it, you dummy!" She snapped. "I *have* imagined it. I imagined it when you fought the troll and when you battled the Archbishops. I imagined it when Elsa attacked you and when we faced the Snow Blight. I imagined it when Roswaal tried to make you his slave and when the Black Water nearly killed you. I've been imagining it since the day that we met and you never even noticed!"

Subaru frowned. "That's... I mean, that's... different..." He said lamely.

Emilia shook her head. "Subaru Natsuki, you are nothing but a spoiled child," She said in a voice of contempt. "Your

whole objection to me fighting is that you don't want to have to worry about the person you love getting hurt. I've been worried about that since literally the day that we met and you never gave it a second thought! Now, after just a few days of worrying about me, you're already prepared to cry quits! Does that sound *fair* to you?!"

Subaru hesitated. "Well, no..." He admitted.

Subaru struggled to put his thoughts into words. "I... Look, Emilia," He whispered, reaching out to take her hands. She reluctantly allowed him to take them, her face still sullen. "You are everything to me! I can't handle even the possibility of losing you. If you died, I'd have nothing to live for!" He said earnestly.

Emilia just rolled her eyes. "Well, you'd still have more than *me*, Subaru!" Emilia snapped, without an ounce of sympathy.

Subaru blinked.

"Without you, Subaru, I have *nothing*! Especially if Anri dies too. There is no one, literally no one on this entire world who can love me or call me friend. If something happened to me, you would still have Puck and Beatrice, Reinhard and Felt, and even Garfiel, Rem, and Ram. If *you* died, I would be all alone. Forever."

Subaru just stared at her.

"We are planning to be married, Subaru," Emilia said intently. "But I will *not* be your house pet. If I'm going to be your wife then we will face every challenge side by side. I don't care how dangerous it is. If you're in danger than I'm going to share that danger with you. End of discussion."

Subaru swallowed hard. "What if... something happens to you?" Subaru murmured in a frightened voice.

Emilia sighed. "Subaru," She said in a more conciliatory tone, "I need you to trust me right now."

Subaru shook his head. "Emilia, I trust you with my life."

"Do you trust me with *mine*?"

"Huh?"

"Subaru, you don't want me to fight with you because you're afraid that I'll get hurt. I don't want you to fight alone because I'm afraid that *you'll* get hurt."

Subaru hesitated.

"Subaru," Emilia said, stepping closer to him. "If we are going to have any chance at all in curing my curse and reuniting our family, it is going to be extremely dangerous. It will be dangerous even with both of us working together. It would be impossible for you working alone. That's why I need you to trust that I can help you and that I won't let you down in a dangerous situation. I need you to trust that, no matter what happens, I can protect myself *and* be there to watch out for you. The same way I trust that you can protect yourself and that you'll look out for me."

"I *do* trust you, Mili," Subaru assured her.

"No, you don't, Subaru! You're trying to keep me here safe and out of the way because you *don't* trust me. I'm not talking about trusting me not to betray you. I mean trusting me not to mess up when it matters the most. You feel that you can't trust me to be able to help you when things get desperate or even to be able to protect *myself* from danger so that you don't have to do it. You think that I'm more of a hindrance than help.

"You *don't* trust me. And I understand why! I've let you down so many times! It was my fault that Roswaal separated us, it was my fault that Felt and the others turned against us, and it was my fault that Reinhard found us and took the spirits away! I know that you have no reason to trust me right now. I am the most pathetic failure of a woman on the face of this world!" Emilia said, bowing her head with tears standing in her eyes.

Subaru's jaw dropped but he didn't know what to say.

Emilia sighed and raised her head. She looked Subaru square in the eye and said firmly. "But I'm also the woman who killed the Bowel Hunter. I'm the woman who fought the stormcrow to protect you. I'm the woman who fought the Snow Blight at your side. I'm the woman who pulled you out of the icy lake and brought you home safely. I'm the woman who got us out of Ganaks and who freed the Sanctuary. I did all of that because you needed me to!" She proclaimed in a loud voice. "Subaru, I need you to have faith in me just one more time! I need you to believe in me when I say that if the man I love really needs me to succeed then there's no way that I'll fail!"

***Chapter 23*: Chapter 23**

Subaru could do nothing but stare at Emilia in awe. He'd only seen her like this once before: when she was telling Roswaal that she would pass the Trials no matter what.

That she would pass the trials *for him*.

"I am your partner, Subaru. The only way I'll stay out of the fight is if you do too. Every danger that threatens you, threatens me too. And from now on, we're going to face them all together," Emilia said firmly.

"Emilia..." He murmured.

"I *won't* leave you," Emilia whispered.

Subaru bit his lip and slowly nodded. "Yeah... I recognize *that* look on your face."

A moment passed and Subaru wasn't sure how it had happened but he suddenly discovered that Emilia was in his arms and they held each other tight.

"God damn it, Emilia," Subaru almost whimpered. "Why do you always have to be so brave?" Subaru realized that he was crying.

Emilia giggled through her own tears. "I keep wanting to ask you that same question."

Subaru took a deep breath. "You had better not die, Emilia. If you die, I'll never forgive you!"

Emilia chuckled.

Subaru sighed as they drew apart. He wiped his eyes. "Alright. Let's go find Antilles and his soldiers. Then we can all make plans to do yet another thing that's really, really stupid."

Subaru and Emilia found the soldiers just inside the forest.

"Alright, Captain," Subaru said. "I think we have a plan."

Subaru quickly spelled out his idea.

Antilles scratched his chin as he thought it over. "It sounds feasible, I suppose. But how do you plan to distract the soldiers? I completely expect my men to refuse such a suicide mission, nor would I fault them for doing so. Even in the best laid plans, the bait tends to get eaten. Even if you convinced my men to try-"

"I'm not asking your men to do that, Captain," Subaru cut him off. "I'm planning to use mabeasts."

"*Mabeasts?*!" Antilles asked incredulously. He stared at Subaru and Emilia for a long moment as if waiting for either to confess that they were just joking. "Ignoring for the moment the legal and ethical implications of using mabeasts in warfare, how do you even intend to convince them to attack the camp?!"

Subaru hesitated. *Oh, fuck! How am I going to explain this?!*

"Subaru has a special bait from his homeland," Emilia stepped in quickly. "It's a very effective mabeast bait. We'll go to a forest not far from here and lay down a trail. The mabeasts will come."

Nice one, Mili! Subaru thought, looking impressed.

Emilia caught his glance and flushed but she looked quite pleased with herself.

Antilles was digesting Emilia's story. "What is this bait called?"

Oh, shit. Not again.

Subaru glanced at Emilia but she hesitated.

Subaru coughed. "It's called... umm... 'Scooby and Shaggy,'" Subaru said lamely.

Oh God. I did not just say that!

"I've never heard of this substance before," Antilles replied in confusion.

"Oh! It's amazing bait," Subaru assured him. "Back home it's what people always use to... lure the monsters into a trap," He finished lamely.

I need to get better at making up names in the spur of the moment! I can almost hear everyone back home laughing at me for this one!

Antilles thought for a moment. "A horde of mabeasts would certainly be an effective distraction," He admitted.

Subaru nodded. "There's a mabeast infested forest a few hours away. Emilia and I will go back there and lay down bait to gather the mabeasts to attack the camp. We'll try to time the attack to happen a little before dawn. We'll rescue Anri at the same time."

While the soldiers got busy with the sesame seed oil, Emilia and Subaru raced back to the Elier Forest on Patrasche.

It was nighttime when the dragon finally stepped onto the snow under the forest eaves.

Emilia whispered, "Subaru, how are we going to find the mabeasts?"

A low growl from the woods answered her.

Emilia held onto Subaru a little tighter and Patrasche took a step back as dozens of wolgarms and a few Guiltylowe began to creep out of the shadows.

"I called them as soon as we were close enough," He answered. "So that they'd be waiting here for us."

Subaru was having misgivings about his plan. *I know this sounds weird but... I kind of feel guilty about this. I am risking their lives here. They're just supposed to be a distraction but some of them could easily be killed in this fight. This isn't like throwing them at a group of poorly armed smugglers.*

I'll make sure that I tell them to keep their distance. They don't have to kill any soldiers. Just distract them for about two minutes.

The mabeasts continued to gather around Patrasche, looking up at Subaru with loathing. In short order, there were sixty of them gathered around the riding dragon who nervously fidgeted.

Subaru swallowed hard. "Alright, let's go!"

It was well after midnight. Malcolm an Griest had been busy writing letters and making plans for the army but he was finally ready to turn in for the night.

"Prince Malcolm!" A voice shouted.

Malcolm grumbled to himself and turned to see who had hailed him. He wasn't very surprised to see the Generals of the four armies belonging to the other Houses standing there, all looking angry.

"What is it?" Malcolm said with an edge in his voice.

"We understand that you've taken Princess Kairei prisoner," The general from House Hilde said. He was a tall, solid man with gray hair. While they'd spoken several times, Malcolm couldn't remember his name, nor did he particularly care.

"If you're here to congratulate me then I think this could have waited until morning," Malcolm grumbled.

"We're here to demand that you send her away immediately," The Brokvar general said flatly.

"What?!" Malcolm demanded. "You expect me to set her free? Are you all aligned with House Ithil now?!"

"No. And nobody said anything about setting her free. We don't care what happens to her," The Craite General sniffed. "But we're not aligned with you in this matter either!"

"He's right, Prince Malcolm," The Hilde general grumbled. "We're neutral in your war with Ithil. Now, because the princess is here, our soldiers are helping you guard her! You're making it look like our Houses are aligned *against* House Ithil and aligned *with* House Griest!"

"As you should be," Malcolm growled. "House Ithil will be extinct in a matter of days and House Griest will once again claim the Holy King's throne. You had better sort out where your loyalties are."

"My loyalties are to Prince Donar," The Hilde general said with disdain. "And I can tell you right now that he'll be furious if we're even giving the appearance of taking sides in this war. Send the Princess back to Sanshi with some of *your* men. Tonight."

"I don't take orders from you!" Malcolm roared.

"Do it," The Craite General said in a firm voice. "Or tomorrow, we make separate camps. We're not courting trouble from Siros *or* the Hierocracy."

Malcolm glowered at them. "You are making a very powerful enemy right now."

"We'll pass that on to our Princes," General Brokvar said shortly.

Malcolm scowled at them for a long moment. "One more thing," Malcolm grated. "I want all our forces ready for battle just after sunrise."

"Battle?" The General from Voivode said in surprise.

Malcolm nodded. "The Lagunican army will be here just after sunrise. Possibly with detachments from Siros."

The Craite General looked incredulously. "Prince Malcolm," He said in a tone that suggested he was fighting for patience. "*None* of our scouts have reported any sightings at all! Much less a whole army!"

"You have your orders," Malcolm said flatly. "I have it on *very* good authority that the army that guards the princess will attack at sunrise and I intend to be ready for it. Be of good cheer, however, gentlemen. I am absolutely certain that we are a *vastly* superior force to our enemies and the princess's army will be destroyed easily."

"Prince Malcolm," The Brokvar General grated. "Would you kindly explain to us the *source* of this intelligence?"

"It's confidential," Malcolm said shortly.

The four generals fumed and turned to walk away, leaving Malcolm standing beside his tent.

Some hours later, Subaru and Emilia sneaked through the dense, tall grass not far from the camp. They'd left Patrasche with Captain Antilles's men. They crept to the very edge of the tall grass, only fifty yards or so from the outer tents in the camp.

The pair crouched low to avoid detection.

"Now what?" Emilia breathed in his ear.

Subaru hesitated. "Mili, you know... this could get ugly right?" He said gently. "We can't risk anyone we bump into inside the camp raising an alarm. We'll need to kill anyone we see, quickly and quietly.

Emilia nodded. Her face was unhappy but it was determined. "I'm not the fainting flower you think I am, Subaru," She said firmly. "And I have very little sympathy for soldiers holding an unarmed girl captive. I don't want to kill anyone but I won't flinch from it either," She said simply.

Subaru studied her for a long moment and then slowly nodded. "Alright. Then sun will rise in an hour or two. We want to be out of the valley before that happens. I'm going to tell the mabeasts to start prowling near the other side of the camp. Then when the alarm sounds, we'll run into the camp. I'll cut through the canvas of the 'jail tent' with Anri's rapier. With any luck, the guards will be gone or at least won't notice us. We'll free Anri and flee back through the field. If we're pursued, Antilles is standing by with fire arrows to set the field smoking to force the soldiers back. Then we all group up and get the hell out of here!"

Emilia nodded. "What about the Acolyte Knights?" She asked.

Subaru nodded. "If we're lucky, they'll get caught up in the smoke and lose our trail too. If not, I'll pop *Pridebreaker* on them. That should reduce them to ordinary fighters. We should be able to handle them then."

Emilia took a deep breath. "Alright, Subaru. I'm ready when you are."

Subaru hesitated. "Mili, just... promise me that you'll be careful," He pleaded.

"I will," She replied calmly, studying the camp. "I'd ask you for the same promise but I know that you'd break it and I don't like liars."

Subaru gave her a hurt look.

"Come on, Subaru," Emilia said calmly. "The night is passing."

Subaru closed his eyes for a moment.

Well. Here goes nothing.

Subaru unleashed his monsters.

Deann and Duncan were sleeping side by side in their tent. One of the nicer things about being on campaign was, due to the scarcity of available tents, no one could really object to them sharing accommodations.

There was a loud commotion outside and Duncan begrudgingly rose to wakefulness.

"What's all that racket?" He muttered.

"I'm not sure," Deann said in a sleepy voice. "Hopefully Lady Kairei didn't try to kill herself again. The healers were most upset to have been woken up in the middle of the night."

Duncan flinched. *Poor girl. Denied even a death of her own choosing...* He fought to go back to sleep to avoid the harsh realities of the world for a few more hours.

Deann opened her eyes. "No," She said in deepening concern. "No, this is too much excitement for that..."

The urgent tone of her voice pulled Duncan from sleep and they both sat up.

There was a chilling roar from outside.

Horns blared and men were running toward the other side of the camp.

"Best chance we're going to get!" Subaru said.

Subaru and Emilia sprinted toward the camp as every guard they could see raced in the other direction.

Emilia easily outpaced Subaru and reached the tent, looking around for any guards.

It took Subaru almost another half minute to get there and he was panting and trying to muffle the sound.

"Subaru, don't try to run so fast," Emilia chided in a whisper. "You don't have mana to support you. This is a marathon not a sprint."

Subaru nodded as he drew Anri's rapier and slowly cut a vertical line in the tent canvas from the bottom to just above their heads.

The two slipped into the tent.

Subaru grabbed Emilia and gestured toward the door. Two soldiers still stood guard there, their attention riveted on the disruption across camp.

Subaru made a stabbing gesture at the guards and Emilia nodded, conjuring up her ice sword.

Subaru barely glanced at the cages as they tiptoed past but it looked like Anri and another prisoner were still asleep.

They were almost within spitting distance of the guards, Emilia creeping silent as a shadow when Subaru accidentally kicked a stone.

The guards started at the sound and began to turn around.

Emilia sprang forward and thrust her sword through the first guard's throat. His face contorted in shock as his legs gave out beneath him and he fell to his knees.

Emilia's face was mournful. "Sorry," Emilia whispered apologetically to the soldier as he died.

The other guard jumped and groped for the horn at his belt, raising it to his lips.

At the last moment, Subaru decided not to use his sword, uncertain if he could deliver an instant kill with it.

Instead, Subaru leaped toward him and triggered *Indomitable*. He drove his fist into the guard's face and his skull exploded in a great glut of blood. The headless body fell to the ground.

Subaru bit his lip, looking at the great puddle of blood spreading across the ground.

Emilia looked down uncomfortably at the spreading pool of blood. "Subaru, should we hide the bodies?" Emilia whispered.

Subaru shook his head. "No point! We don't have time to clean up the blood and the guards being missing from their post would arouse suspicion anyway!" Subaru hissed as they charged back into the tent and raced to Anri's cage.

Anri was stirring from all the noise. The girl looked up with a studied expression of bored disdain. When she saw who was standing there, her eyes opened wide with wonder.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and shattered the lock on the cage door with a single blow.

Anri shoved the door open and flung herself into Emilia's arms.

"Emilia! Subaru!" Anri whispered in joy.

"Anri!" Emilia said, holding her close.

Subaru chuckled, patting Anri's head. "Come on, kid. You weren't really going to leave us without saying goodbye, were you?"

Anri grinned at him.

Emilia shook her head and let go of Anri. "Subaru, we need to get out of here!"

Subaru nodded. "Right. Let's go!"

"Wait!" Anri hissed. "You need to save Julius too!"

"Save who?" Subaru said, looking at the other cage.

Julius Juukulus stared back at him from inside the cage with a glower of profound contempt.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Subaru said in a flat voice. "What the hell-"

"No time!" Anri whispered. "Break the lock!"

Do I have to? Subaru muttered to himself.

"Subaru!" Emilia hissed. "This isn't the time!"

Subaru sighed but triggered *Indomitable* and broke the cage open.

Julius stepped out of the cage and gave a slight bow, a bow that was directed to *Anri* and no one else. "Thank you, Princess," He said stiffly.

Julius! I can put you right back where I found you, you know! Subaru seethed.

Subaru shook off his irritation. "Come on! We have to get out of here!"

The group raced out of the back of the tent, Julius pausing only long enough to grab his sword belt from a nearby chest and buckle it around his waist.

The four sprinted into the tall grass and raced through it.

"Emilia! How did you find me?" Anri said in wonder.

"Subaru and I followed your tracks," Emilia explained. "Then we worked with some Siros soldiers to rescue you."

"Princess," Julius said, ignoring Subaru and Emilia, "We need to escape this valley quickly. Whatever distraction bedevils the camp, it will not take them long to resolve it!"

Oh right, Subaru thought. He sent a mental command to the mabeasts to withdraw. He sensed that none had been seriously injured and he told them to run back to the wood.

There's no point in keeping them here. Even if we do need to fight our way out, sixty mabeasts is a joke against ten thousand soldiers. There's no point in them dying beside us.

...Am I seriously concerned for the safety of mabeasts now?

A horn blew behind them.

"OK," Subaru grumbled. "I'm guessing that our grace period has run out."

Emilia's ear twitched. "Subaru, they found our trail!" She said in a worried tone. "I can hear them running through the tall grass!"

"How will we escape?!" Anri gasped.

"Hang on, Anri! We're almost out!" Subaru said, panting for breath as well.

The group broke through the last of the tall grass and sprinted up a rocky hill toward valley cliffs.

Patrasche stood waiting there.

Shit! Can Patrasche carry four people?!

I guess she can. At least for a short distance. We don't have to go very far before they'll give up on coming after us.

And if we need someone to sacrifice themselves, maybe I can talk Julius into doing it...

Subaru scanned the ridge above him for Antilles's men but he couldn't see anyone.

Don't panic! That's good. They're supposed to be hiding. They'll set the fields to smoking when they see the soldiers. Right now, they don't know if anyone is in the fields! Look on the bright side, if you can't find those soldiers then there's no way that the soldiers can!

At that moment, Subaru saw dozens of flaming arrows lance out over the valley and plunged into the tall grass that carpeted the valley and was filled with thousands of charging soldiers.

Subaru paused to look back with a smile that faltered quickly. Subaru saw that the three Acolyte Knights had emerged from the grass, all looking very angry and a handful of other soldiers were with them.

The arrows struck the grass and as Subaru had predicated the areas struck immediately began to smoke, a heavy, greasy smoke that caused a fit of coughing and choking that Subaru could hear from a hundred yards out of the grass.

Then the flames spread. The fire swept across the entire field like a great wave until a patch of the valley hundreds of feet wide burned bright as the sun. The tall grass became towering tongues of flame.

There was a deafening wail as thousands of soldiers screamed in terror and pain.

Subaru gasped.

The four stared at the killing field as did the Acolyte Knights. For a moment, everyone could only stare at the spectacle in horror.

The field burned as if it had been doused in lantern oil. The flames licked at the tall grass in plumes of fire at least ten feet high that completely obscured the field. Subaru was standing a hundred feet from the edge and he still was forced to avert his eyes from the heat.

The enormous field was an inescapable trap for the soldiers. Those soldiers who were standing at the very edge managed to roll out of the burning field and frantically beat out the flames on their bodies. But for everyone else, there was no escape. Just a few feet away from the edge of the field, the fire and smoke were blinding and the soldiers were surrounded by their comrades, all bumping into one another and knocking each other down.

In less than a minute, the screams stopped and there was nothing but coughing and gasping. Then all was silent as thousands of soldiers succumbed to the heat or passed out from the smoke.

Subaru could only stare at the conflagration in shock and horror.

What have I done?! I didn't... This is sesame seed oil not gasoline! I told the soldiers to soak that field in something that you put on salads! I thought that the smoke would blind them! Scare them! OK, I knew that they would get scorched but

I didn't... I didn't mean to them burn alive!

Subaru was gasping for breath. He looked around helplessly. Julius gave him a look of loathing and Anri stared at him in shocked disbelief.

Subaru looked at Emilia in desperation. Emilia was crying but she managed to give Subaru a sad smile and wrapped her arms around him.

"What have you done?!" A man roared.

Subaru looked down the hill and saw Malcolm and Griest staring up at him, trembling with fury.

Subaru wanted to ask himself the exact same question but instead he forced himself to laugh. "I'd say that should be obvious, even to you!" Subaru said, knowing that his voice sounded shrill and frightened even to himself. "I just destroyed your army, rescued your prisoners, and led you around on a merry chase like a pack of fools!"

Malcolm gaped up the hill and his face turned bright red. A few of the soldiers who had survived the fiery Holocaust began to limp over to him but they were badly burned and their eyes were wide with horror. The fight had been knocked out of them.

Floating spirits drifted among the surviving soldiers like shining balls of brilliant light. The fire was no threat to these glowing spirits.

"Princess Kairei!" Malcolm roared. "I was foolish enough to offer you a quick, merciful death! No longer! You and your degenerate allies will burn for this, just as you burned my men!"

Subaru and Emilia stepped forward, quickly followed by Julius. "Hey! Leave Kairei out of this!" Subaru said quickly. "I beat you! Me! This was *my* trap that you blundered into like an idiot. I've destroyed your army. And if you want to do anything to Kairei, you'll have to get past me first!" Subaru shouted back, drawing Anri's rapier.

"Subaru!" Anri hissed, grabbing his hand.

Subaru looked at her in surprise as he felt two tiny stones pressed into his hand.

"Take these!" She whispered.

Subaru looked down at the lightning stones.

Alright! At least I have some kind of edge now!

Malcolm, Deann, and Duncan began to climb the hill toward Subaru and his friends.

"You're a fool, boy!" Malcolm snarled. "You are now about to face three of the Acolyte Knights in battle! But don't be thinking that you'll die cleanly in combat! Once you're all captured, you will be brought back to Sanshi and tried for this atrocity. When all the niceties are wrapped up, I intend to see that you'll be given living to the fire just as you did to my men!"

"That remains to be seen!" Julius shouted back as Subaru quickly slid the lightning stones into the rapier. "A wise man once said, 'Forbear celebration until after victory is secured!'"

Leave it to Julius, Subaru thought, rolling his eyes. Even his taunts are overly formal!

"Princess," Julius said in a whisper. "I urge you to flee while you can. This bracelet seals my magic and connection to my spirits. I fear that this fight is without final hope."

Anri shook her head. "I'm not leaving you!" Anri said defiantly, looking at her defenders.

"Bracelet?" Subaru asked. He looked at Julius's arm and saw a small bracelet of shiny black stones wrapped around his wrist. "What is that?"

Julius grimaced. "It is called an Evil Sealing Stone bracelet. They are very expensive and used to seal the magical power of extremely potent foes. Perhaps I should be flattered that the Gusteko soldiers saw fit to waste one on me."

Subaru frowned. "Aren't you going to take it off?"

"If I could do that, do you not think that I would have?" Julius said with an edge in his voice.

Subaru's eyes narrowed. He stomped over to Julius and grabbed his bracelet.

Julius snorted. "You are wasting your time. It is easy to apply such a bracelet to a person but nearly impossible to take it off. It often takes a dozen mages working in concert to remove one! The only person I know of who could remove such a bracelet singlehandedly is Rei!"

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and snapped the stones apart. The bracelet came off with a sound like thunder that made them all jump.

The Acolyte Knights paused in their climb, staring up at Subaru in confusion and disbelief.

Subaru stared at the bracelet in confusion. There seemed to be no string that the cold glossy stones were strung on but

they still clung together as if they were magnetized.

Subaru shook his head. *Figure this thing out later*, He thought, tucking the bracelet into his satchel.

Julius stared at Subaru in shock.

"Is your magic back?" Subaru asked impatiently.

Julius shook off his astonishment. "I have *some*," He emphasized. "Remember that your witchcraft has damaged my connection to the spirits and much of my magic is temporarily sealed," Julius trailed off in a growl as his eyes bored into Subaru's.

Subaru blinked. *I damaged his connection to his spirit partners? Shit, I didn't mean to do that. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy that Julius is taking a fall. He deserves one. But damaging his connection with the spirits...*

Subaru looked down at Julius's wrist where the six spirits still orbited peacefully with no sign of any damage.

Being separated from Beatrice is bad enough but imagine if Reinhard had done something to damage our connection... If I knew that she didn't feel the same way about me anymore...

I'd be furious. I'd want to drink his blood.

Don't tell me that I owe Julius an apology...

Unfortunately, I really can't come up with a good argument against it.

Just do it, Subaru.

Subaru let out a hiss. "I'm sorry, alright?" He said, quickly. "I just wanted to hold you off long enough to escape. I'm still figuring out my power and I didn't know that it would do that to you..." He grumbled.

Julius blinked and frowned.

Anri scoffed. "Hey! Can we talk about who's to blame for all of this, later?" Anri hissed.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered. "When are you going to use your magic on them?"

Julius stiffened. "Subaru Natsuki, do you truly mean to use the same witchcraft you applied to me on the Acolyte Knights?!"

Subaru snorted. "I trust you have no objections?" He asked sarcastically.

Julius's face was stony. "To my shame, no. My death in this conflict means Princess Kairei shall fall for certain and I can not permit this. This pragmatism in the face of witchcraft fills me with shame. A truly good man would refuse to associate with witchcraft, even to save his own life."

Subaru snorted. "I guess that explains why there aren't more 'good' people around. They throw their lives away for stupid reasons," Subaru muttered.

"Subaru!" Emilia hissed as the Acolyte Knights began to climb the hill where Subaru, Emilia, and Julius waited. Anri stood nervously behind them. "Are you going to use it now?!"

Subaru sighed. "I'm not springing that trap until the last moment, Mili. I don't want any of these knights to have second thoughts about running away."

Julius made a sound of agreement. "I must admit that your grasp of strategy is sound, Subaru. You appear to be an admirable tactician, even if that is your *only* admirable quality. Lady Crusch must have greatly appreciated your counsel during the Whale Hunt."

Subaru burst out laughing, much to Julius's confusion.

Julius shook off his confusion and gave Subaru a look of annoyance. "Subaru Natsuki, it seems that a duel is in the offing. Perhaps we should each choose our targets."

Subaru thought for a moment. "Malcolm an Griest is the target. If he goes down, I'm guessing that his plans for war with Siros go into indefinite hiatus. I'll fight him. I'll try to take him alive if possible."

Julius stared at Subaru in shock and then he started to laugh. "I see that Felix wasn't exaggerating about your confidence!"

"Hm?"

"Felix told me all about the Whale Hunt. He said bluntly that he and Lady Crusch found your relentless optimism and fortitude most annoying."

"Fuck," Subaru bit off a curse. "And just think, I wasted a full two weeks during the Whale Hunt desperately trying to make friends with those jerks! Alright. I'll take Malcolm an Griest. Julius, you good with fighting Deann?"

Julius nodded. "I can't remember the last time I fought without the full strength of my spirits at my side. Without a

doubt, this will be one of the most intense fights of my life but I am resolved to succeed. I owe Princess Kairei my life and I will not fail to repay that debt."

Subaru chuckled. "Hey. You're not so bad in the confidence department either."

Julius gave him a slight smile.

"Then that leaves me with Sir Duncan," Emilia said calmly.

Subaru gave her a worried look.

As Malcolm and the others slowly climbed the hill. Even from a distance, Subaru could see Malcolm grinding his teeth. The big man roared, "Know that you will die today and that your death will not be an easy one. Do you have the slightest idea who I am?!"

"Not really," Subaru said. "Do you know who *I* am?"

Malcolm hesitated for a moment. "No," He admitted.

Subaru shrugged. "Well, there we are then," Subaru said sarcastically.

Subaru thought that he heard Duncan swallow a snort. Deann and Malcolm both gave him a dirty look.

Subaru marched forward and threw back his hood. "I am Subaru Natsuki," Subaru proclaimed. "I call Princess Kairei my friend and I intend to bring her home today! You whelps are impeding my progress. It would amuse me if you would each contend with me and my companions in single combat! If, however, you are all such spineless *dogs* that you have no stomach for such a contest, then please stand aside so that your betters may pass!"

A few feet behind Subaru, Julius was making strangling sounds.

Malcolm and Griest was purple with rage.

Julius was hissing like a boiling teakettle. "*Why* would he do something like this?!" He whispered to Anri.

"He always does things like this," Emilia replied calmly before Anri could respond. "Subaru likes to make people angry before he fights them. He claims that it's to prevent his opponents from thinking clearly during the fight but personally, I think he just does it for his own entertainment."

"Oh, Gods!" Julius said in despair.

"Calm down!" Subaru snapped out of the corner of his mouth. "Look! We want them to attack us without thinking so that they'll blunder into our trap. This should do it."

Julius made a face. "You are correct," He admitted, "But this is not at all virtuous behavior to my mind."

"Julius," Subaru sighed. "At the moment, I'm just worried about saving Anri's life. Not to mention our own. I couldn't honestly care less how 'virtuous' my behavior is."

"You little fool! I will teach you respect myself!" Malcolm proclaimed, marching up to Subaru.

"Will you?" Subaru replied in a bored tone. "Maybe you should *study* the subject a little before you try to turn instructor."

Julius took a position across from Deann while Emilia conjured her ice sword. She approached Duncan who wore heavy armor and carried a heavy flanged mace.

Subaru swallowed hard. *Can Emilia handle that? A sword made out of ice is no match for a mace! And her sword certainly won't pierce his armor! Maybe we should swap opponents. But can she fight Malcolm? Malcolm is supposed to be the strongest one! What if-*

The few soldiers standing at the base of the hill who had been worriedly murmuring to one another suddenly became silent. Then their faces twisted in disgust and they started shouting, hurling curses and slurs.

Subaru glanced at Emilia and saw that she had lowered her hood. Everyone could see that she was an elf. However, she ignored the curses being thrown from the Gusteko army. Subaru saw Emilia looking back at him calmly. But more than that, her eyes held an unspoken plea. He heard her request as clearly as if she had said it out loud:

Subaru. Please. Trust me.

More than anything else, I need you to trust me. I need you to believe that I'm not just baggage on this journey that we're taking together. I need you to know that I'm more than just someone that you need to spend your life protecting. I need you to believe that we can work together to protect each other. I need you to believe that together we can accomplish more than either of us could alone. Please, Subaru. Trust me.

Subaru took a long, slow breath. He bit his tongue until he tasted blood. Finally, fighting every instinct that screamed at him not to do it, Subaru deliberately turned his back toward Emilia so that he could give Malcolm and Griest his full attention.

This is crazy! Why am I doing this?! Why am I letting Emilia do this? Fuck me, I hate this!

The three Acolyte Knights stood ramrod straight and then they each began to glow. Malcolm gained a red aura, Deann's was green, and Duncan's was blue.

They were close enough for Subaru to see their spirits. They looked like tiny balls of light spinning around their wrists, just like Julius's.

Malcolm drew a huge two handed sword. "I hope that you realize," Malcolm growled. "That you are hopelessly outmatched!"

"Yeah?" Subaru spat back. "Well... I hope you realize that you're just hopeless!"

Malcolm's eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped. Julius winced.

OK that was a very dumb retort, no question, but I have bigger problems on my mind right now.

"I'm sorry, *Grease*," Subaru said as insultingly as he could. "This isn't really about you but I need to blow off some steam!" Subaru roared.

Subaru raised his hand toward the Acolyte Knights. "*Pridebreaker!*" He shouted, bending all of his rage at the three knights.

Julius flinched as he felt Subaru's power wash over him like a great wave. His spirits all clung tightly to his arm as if afraid that Subaru would seize them again but the power Subaru had unleashed paid them no heed as it surged across the area.

Most of the surviving Gusteko soldiers had no reaction to it at all but the three knights were driven to their knees with a gasp. The numerous spirits that drifted among the surviving soldiers all shuddered in midair. As one, these spirits all turned tail and fled back into the valley, their glowing bodies dancing across the waving grass in blind panic. Some shot straight out over the cliffs, their bodies streaking through the air like comets and throwing the remaining Gusteko soldiers into mass confusion.

"What... did you do?!" Malcolm demanded as the knights fought their way back to their feet.

Subaru spread his arms wide. "I have given you but a small taste of my vast power! I am Subaru Natsuki! And the magic of this world is mine to command!"

The knights' spirits sped away from their bodies. They all flew to Subaru's outstretched arm and took up orbit around it. In seconds it looked as though his arm was swarming with giant fireflies.

In his mind, Subaru suddenly heard dozens of voices fervently singing his praises.

Emilia stared at the spirits with a puzzled expression. She started to ask Subaru a question, then she remembered herself and turned her attention back to their foes.

Deann and Duncan stared at Subaru in horror. They looked at each other desperately.

Malcolm scowled at Subaru, raising his sword. "I am not defeated so easily, Subaru Natsuki! You have crossed the great nation of Gusteko once too often! Now you will pay for your insolence!"

"Blah, Blah, Blah," Subaru called back. "You going to talk me to death or are we going to fight?"

Sir Duncan was the first to attack. He clapped his visor down over his face and leaped forward. He raised up his great mace and brought it down on the elf girl's head.

But Emilia leaped back and the blow struck nothing but air.

Emilia retaliated by summoning a blizzard of ice crystals that hit Duncan head on like a hailstorm, violently rattling his armor.

When the storm finally subsided, the elf girl stared at Duncan in disbelief. His armor wasn't even scratched.

"I'm afraid that such attacks won't work on me," Duncan said almost politely. "You have just seen my 'Divine Blessing of Magic Nullification' in action. It renders me immune to direct damage by spells."

Emilia's face twisted in outrage. "Again?!" She screeched. "Another person immune to magic?! That is *so* unfair!"

Duncan blinked and his face grew confused.

Then Duncan mentally shrugged. The fight had already started. He didn't feel the need to warn the elf further.

Duncan swung again, not giving the elf time to recover from her shock. He swung the mace in a great horizontal sweep forcing her to duck under the mace's head. She regained her balance and struck at Duncan's face guard with her ice sword, trying to slip the blade through his visor.

She missed. Her sword chipped and pieces of ice went flying but it did no damage to Duncan. He brought his mace down again and the elf leaped back as the heavy weapon smashed into the ground and kicked up a cloud of dust.

Think! What would Subaru do in a situation like this?

He'd come up with something clever and have no trouble dealing with Duncan. But what can I do? Duncan doesn't have a cape that I can burn to make him vulnerable. If he's immune to magic then I'm helpless!

No. I refuse to accept that. I told Subaru that I wouldn't let him down. That I could take care of myself. That we could do more together than we could do apart.

It would be better for me to die here than to prove that my declaration of strength was nothing but words. If I really can't support Subaru in our ordeals then at least I'll stop holding him back...

Enough of this self-pity! Think! How can you fight this mountain of armor?!

Seemingly out of ideas, she turned to flee up the hill. Duncan pursued eagerly.

"Julius Juukulius," Lady Deann murmured, bowing and spreading her arms and twin short swords wide. Her elaborate robe added an elegance to the gesture, as if she were a butterfly spreading its wings. "I've heard a great deal about you. I am sorry to see that you have taken up with a coward and a mass murderer like Subaru Natsuki. It is a most unfortunate way to end one's life. Regardless of this regrettable fact, I do hope that you will entertain me well."

Julius gave her a calm smile. "In Lagunica, I am considered 'the Finest Knight.' I would hate to disappoint you."

Deann laughed. "My opinion of Lagunican knights is so poor that you would have to work very hard indeed to disappoint me."

Without another word, Deann threw herself toward Julius, her swords flying toward him in a deadly arc that was almost too fast to see. Julius parried her right sword but her left blade thrust toward his face and he was forced to leap back or be impaled.

Deann didn't pause for a second. She continued her relentless attack with both swords. This time Julius parried her left sword but he was forced to fall back to avoid a thrust to his stomach from her right blade. This pattern kept repeating itself, Deann constantly surging forward like a whirling storm of flashing blades and Julius constantly on the defensive, barely able to hold back her furious, unrelenting attacks. He called on his spirits for aid, forced to use all of the limited magic available through their damaged connection to enhance his speed and agility, just to keep Deann's twin swords from claiming his life.

"You have mocked Gusteko once too often, boy," Malcolm snarled at Subaru. "I will enjoy killing you slowly."

Subaru yawned. "I can't help noticing that you seem to do everything slowly. Do you get paid by the hour?"

Despite his seeming boredom, Subaru was on edge.

I need to be careful! I can't use Indomitable in this fight without letting the spirits go and that will put everyone in mortal danger! Make another mistake like I did against Julius and I am going to die. And if I die, Emilia dies with me!

Malcolm raised his massive sword for a quick slice at Subaru's neck. Subaru slipped into *Reason and Judgment* and managed to parry the strike but it was much harder than fighting against Julius. Malcolm an Griest's swordsmanship might have been far inferior to the knight's but he was a bear of a man and every stroke that he delivered had a mountain of muscle backing it up.

Malcolm came back with another overhead slash. Subaru parried it and had to throw all his body weight into pushing the blade back.

Malcolm quickly stepped back and Subaru lost his balance, nearly falling on his face.

Malcolm went for a thrust but Subaru's rapier was faster and he swiped at Malcolm's face. Malcolm was forced to jump back to avoid it.

The fight had barely started but Subaru was already sweating and panting for breath while Malcolm still looked fresh and relaxed.

Duncan raced after the fleeing elf as she flew up the hill that led to the sheer valley wall. Duncan had spent years training in his armor. He knew that it made him slow but apparently the elf was in extremely poor shape as Duncan had no trouble keeping pace with the girl. He got a bit closer every second as they approached the top of the hill. Duncan had already realized that the elf was running toward a dead end. Once she reached the pinnacle she'd have nowhere left to run. In a few moments, he'd be in range to finally bring down his great mace down a top her head.

However, he felt slightly uncomfortable with attacking from behind.

To strike a clearly inferior opponent from behind is dishonorable. And yet, I have no facility to take prisoners at this time. I am uncertain what a knight is expected to do in such a case. I wish that I could ask for a cessation of hostilities and discuss the matter with Deann.

I'm certain that I know what Malcolm would say: 'Honor has no place in a fight like this. This is not a duel, this is war. One might as well ask if it is more righteous to step on a cockroach immediately or wait until you are sure it has seen you and had a sporting chance to run. However, the fact remains that a roach is a roach and the goal is to step on it.'

Little as I like to admit it, Malcolm's words hold some wisdom. This is a battlefield where one must expect attacks to

come from any direction without warning. Death in meaningless battle such as this is always unfortunate but this is the way of the world and it is too heavy for me to shift.

The girl reached the top of the hill with Duncan only a half step behind her. She suddenly spun around and waved her hand through the air. Duncan saw a thin layer of ice form, covering the steep and rocky hilltop just as he put his foot down on it. The elf set herself, braced both hands against Duncan's chest plate and *shoved* hard.

Duncan was stunned at the strength in the slender girl's arms and now that he was standing on ice, he had no traction with which to catch himself. He felt his feet slide out from under him on the narrow pinnacle. He made a frantic grab for the elf girl to steady himself but she leaped back and he missed.

Duncan fell backwards, tumbling head over heels as his heavy armor brought him crashing all the way back down the steep hill to the ground far below.

A moment later, Duncan hit the hard dirt with a crash. He found himself flat on his back, panting for breath. He looked up at the smirking she-elf and made what he knew to be a futile attempt to rise. His armor was too heavy. He had no more chance to regain his feet than a turtle on its back.

With a growl of frustration, Duncan closed his eyes and passed out.

Deann was a whirlwind of flashing blades and Julius could only fall back, parry, and dodge.

Deann laughed at him. "I'm considered one of the best duelists in Gusteko! Nobody can match my skill with a blade. Especially a duelist with only one sword because you can only parry one of them at a time. It's an elemental question of mathematics, Julius Juukulus. Two blades are always better than one! You should surrender and save your life!"

"I must disagree," Julius said politely. "Nothing in battle is ever an absolute advantage. Wielding twin blades does give considerable advantages but have you stopped to ponder the disadvantages?"

"What disadvantages?" Deann scoffed.

A moment later her rhythm was interrupted as Julius parried her stroke. Deann started to lash out with her other sword but Julius bent all his strength onto his blade and forced her sword's cutting edge back toward her shoulder.

Deann was forced to step back or risk slicing herself open with her own sword. She recovered herself and tried to resume her relentless, whirling attacks.

She thrust her swords forward and Julius again parried her right sword. He had to step away from her left sword to avoid being impaled but this time he forced her right hand back hard and her sword nearly cut into her own neck.

"Two blades are a significant advantage," Julius continued calmly, as Deann fell back and Julius took the offensive. "It allows you to attack and defend all at the same time! However, there are also corresponding *disadvantages*. For example, because both of your blades are so much shorter than a normal long sword, you have sacrificed reach. This allows me to be able to thrust and parry while you can not respond. Secondly, because you wield a sword in each hand there is no way for you to put all of your muscle behind either blade. This makes it much harder to parry and defend successfully. It's just like my old fencing instructor told me: 'When dual-wielding, any move not an attack is ground lost.' Unfortunately, it is not practical to attempt to do nothing in a fight but attack, unless one only fights opponents of inferior skill and power. I sense that you're noticing that flaw right now."

Julius talked pleasantly but he struck relentlessly at Diane and put her on the defensive. Instead of his normal delicate and precise strikes, Julius now slammed his sword against hers with all of his strength. Deann was barely able to hold Julius back as he slowly wore down her defenses and steadily pushed her backward.

Deann struggled to understand her situation. She'd never been in a fight like this. Julius was fighting recklessly in a way that she had never encountered before. Julius was now dominating the duel but he was also leaving himself wide open to counter-attack. Deann could slay him at any moment but she understood that she would take a death stroke in return.

Deann's eyes widened as she realized that this was Julius's entire plan. He considered his life to be an acceptable trade for killing her.

Deann's back slammed into something. She realized that her back was to a small boulder. Almost too fast to see, Julius's sword swept down at her.

Deann gave a shrill cry of pain and dropped her right sword. She looked down and saw a small cut on the back of her hand. It was a tiny, insignificant wound but it had forced her to drop her sword.

With only one sword, she realized that she had no chance against Julius whatsoever and she dropped her other sword in surrender.

Subaru fought tooth and nail to keep Malcolm an Griest at bay but it was clear that he was losing ground. Subaru used *Reason and Judgment* to make every parry count but he was exhausted and had barely slept in days. Now he was fighting a seasoned warrior twice his size.

What the hell do I do?! He's stronger than me, more skilled, more experienced and he's gotten more than two nights sleep this week!

What's worse is that this fight is obviously for keeps! I wasn't certain if Julius was trying to kill me during our fight but I know for sure now! The only reason that I was able to hold Julius off at all is because he was holding back! He wanted a live prisoner not a bleeding carcass! Malcolm an Griest just wants me dead.

Why isn't the lightning-sword working? I can see the sparks flying when we parry! Is this guy just immune to pain?!

Subaru parried a sword stroke and then tried slipping his rapier past Malcolm with a thrust at his throat.

Malcolm deflected the rapier with a twist of his wrist and knocked Subaru off balance, forcing him to step back to avoid a slash to the face.

Think! Think as fast as you've ever thought in your life! What is this man's weakness?

His arrogance? Well, yeah you used that to goad him into a fight. Not sure that there's any way to use it to get you out of the fight.

OK. He's big and bulky so he's slower and less agile than me. I'm not thinking that helps very much.

His magic is sealed but in effect so is mine.

Subaru parried a sword stroke and Malcolm stepped back with a curse.

"What did you do?" Malcolm shouted. "That parry burned me!"

He does feel it. Wait a second. Before he was furious at me. Probably too angry to pay attention to minor discomfort but now his adrenaline must be running out.

If I can convince him to focus more on the pain...

Subaru stood there for a long moment and then began to laugh.

He held up his rapier. "Do you see this sword?" He asked. "This is Seethe! Rapier of the Sunless Sky! I stole this sword from the Sorcerer King Taiyang! When he attempted to kill me, I managed to escape and stole his weapon as a trophy and a lasting mockery of my foe! This blade carries a terrible curse on it. Its edge cuts both flesh and soul!"

Malcolm sneered at him. "Do you take me for a child to believe fairy tales such as that?!"

Subaru shrugged. "You can believe what you wish. The longer that this fight goes on, the deeper the wounds it inflicts in your very being will become!"

Malcolm looked suddenly unsettled. He quickly inspected his body as if searching for wounds that he had overlooked.

Malcolm lashed out with his sword again, slashing at Subaru's neck.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

He's fighting differently now. He's not going all offense, he's feeling you out and being more cautious. You can easily work with this. If he doesn't bring his full muscle into play then the fight is yours.

Subaru parried the stroke and Malcolm visibly flinched and took a step back.

Malcolm redoubled his efforts to win the fight but his swings became steadily more erratic. None of his strikes ever even got close to Subaru. With each exchange, Malcolm seemed more and more sensitive to the electric shock and he flinched back from each parry. Finally, after one particularly hard parry the General yelped and dropped his sword.

Before he could move, Subaru's rapier was at his throat. "I've only got one question to you, Griest: Death or surrender?" Subaru asked quietly.

The General ground his teeth but put his hands up in surrender.

Subaru heard a rustle in the woods as Captain Antilles and his men emerged from the trees. They surrounded the three Acolyte Knights, chaining them up and leading them away. Malcolm an Griest scowled at Subaru as he was dragged away, the big man struggling to come back and clobber him with his bare hands.

Subaru looked down the hill and saw the surviving soldiers running away.

"Subaru!"

Subaru looked back and saw Emilia racing over to him with a broad smile on her face. "Mili! Are you OK?" He shouted running to her and gathering her in his arms.

Emilia held him tight. "I'm fine, Subaru," She whispered with a chuckle. "I outsmarted him," She said proudly.

Subaru sighed in relief. "Mili, I am so proud of you!" He said earnestly.

Emilia gave a contented sigh, resting her head against his shoulder. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting for you to say that."

Subaru frowned. "What are you talking about? I've said it before. I've said it lots of times."

"Then... maybe I've just been waiting a long time to listen to it."

Subaru looked at her in confusion as they separated.

"Lord Subaru!" Antilles said marching over. "That was a brilliant strategy! This one is definitely going in my memoirs!"

"Remember to spell Emilia and Julius's names right," Subaru commented in a dispirited voice. He looked down over the burned out and blackened field that was covered in bodies. Most of the corpses weren't burned black. The soldiers had obviously died of smoke inhalation or the heat.

"I will, my lord!" Antilles said cheerfully. He gave Emilia another uncertain glance and then walked over to speak to Anri and Julius.

Subaru kept staring at the killing field.

"Subaru," Emilia murmured. "Are you alright?"

Subaru didn't answer.

"Subaru!" She whispered, wrapping her arms around him and holding him tight.

Subaru took a deep, ragged breath. "I read about this trick in a book back home. A famous strategist used to use it all the time. The strategy sounded so... clean and detached when it was written down on paper."

"Subaru," She whispered. "I think... I think no war is clean. You did... what you had to do..."

"Did I?" Subaru whimpered.

Emilia took a deep breath. "You saved Anri's life. And probably her entire kingdom. You may have even stopped a war. You should be proud," Emilia said, trying to sound more certain than she felt.

Subaru shook his head. "I didn't mean for this to happen, Mili. I swear..."

Emilia held him close.

Subaru and Emilia stood there in silence for a time. Emilia wasn't certain what to say and Subaru just closed his eyes and let her support him for a time.

"As little as I like to admit it, Subaru Natsuki," Julius said walking over to them while Anri continued to talk to Antilles. "I am in your debt for your gallant rescue and congratulations are due. Your plan was the work of sheer genius."

Subaru gave a weak chuckle. "Congratulations? Honestly, Julius, after all this, I thought you'd be ready to walk over here and cut my head off!" He murmured, staring out at the field of bodies with a thousand yard stare. Subaru shook his head. "I didn't realize that this would happen..."

Julius frowned. "What do you mean?"

Subaru sighed and covered his face. "I thought... I thought that those soldiers would get scorched! I thought that they would panic and run away! It's sesame seed oil, not gasoline! I didn't mean to burn them alive!"

Julius stared at Subaru in disbelief. "Subaru Natsuki," He whispered. "Are you telling me that you proposed and carried out this plan without the merest inkling of what the consequences would be?!"

Subaru bit his lip and looked guilty. Emilia glared at Julius.

Julius shook his head angrily. "This is beyond ludicrous!" Julius pronounced. "Lady Anastasia, who is not easily impressed, has often spoken of your extraordinary intelligence and vision! Where was that today?! You killed *thousands* of men by your actions... with *no* foreknowledge of that being the outcome?! Where you even certain that *we* would survive the firestorm that you unleashed?! Subaru Natsuki, you are truly a reckless fool! You should not unleash powers that you do not understand!"

Subaru flinched at Julius's words and looked away. He suddenly looked very young and uncertain.

"Julius! You said that it was a *good* plan a minute ago!" Emilia snarled at Julius.

Julius shook his head. "Indeed it was. A dire choice but a most effective one. Generals and leaders have been forced to make such choices since the dawn of time. It is altogether fitting for a man in battle to measure the lives of his men versus the lives of his foe and determine which need be sacrificed. But Subaru Natsuki has admitted that he made no such decision! He destroyed all of these soldiers by sheer mischance! Would you have used the same technique against unarmed pursuers because you foolishly believed it harmless?!"

Subaru buried his face in Emilia's shoulder and shut his eyes.

"That's enough, Julius!" Emilia snarled at him, holding Subaru protectively in her arms. "Leave Subaru alone! He saved Anri and *all* of us! If you had a better idea, where was it a few hours ago?!"

Julius stared at Emilia in surprise. "You are... most protective for a witch," He murmured.

Emilia glared at him. "Sir Julius," She said in a hard tone. "My name is Emilia and I would prefer that you address me as such. Perhaps it will remind you that I am person, just like yourself. It's always easier to hate a race or a group because they are faceless and nameless. If you are to hate me, I would prefer that you hated *me* personally, not what I am."

Julius blinked, his eyes growing wide. He seemed to have no response to this.

Julius glanced down at Subaru who seemed to have crumpled under the weight his own actions. Julius's face softened slightly with sympathy. Julius sighed, "All that being the case, Subaru Natsuki, you have achieved a great victory this day. You defeated ten thousand men with a force of fifty and suffered no casualties as a result! You rescued the princess safely and may have singlehandedly prevented a war. Strategists will study this victory for a thousand years!"

Subaru sighed. "And likely learn the wrong lessons from it," He whispered, leaning back against Emilia who held him close and still scowled at Julius.

Julius nodded with a grave expression. "At the heart of every war is a tragedy. Each war has unintended victims and far too many go unacknowledged. But there was no crime in what you did here today. You were fighting against soldiers engaged in open, hostile action. Not even Lady Crusch could find fault in your decision."

"Crusch can always find fault in my decisions," He said in a weak voice. "It's all just... just so stupid..."

"Stupid?" He asked.

"*Griest* was the one who did this. Who stirred up all this trouble. Who put all these men's lives on the line. Now *he's* alive and most of his soldiers are dead. There must have been a better way to..."

Julius looked at Subaru, his expression thoughtful. "Perhaps," He admitted. "Perhaps there was a better way. Perhaps you found the best way that could be found. In truth, you'll never know. Still you won a great victory and protected those close to you. That is a triumph."

Subaru sighed. "I guess. But if this is victory, Julius, then I think my hands are too small to hold it..."

Julius looked at Subaru with a thoughtful expression.

Subaru took a deep breath and forcibly tried to shake off his melancholy. He deliberately turned his back on the still-smoldering killing field. Subaru forced a smile on his face. "Anyway, nice work with Deann, Jules! I really can't believe that we all survived that!" Subaru said with a weak laugh.

Julius smiled a little sadly. "Perhaps your vaunted confidence does have limits after all, Subaru."

Subaru chuckled ruefully. "I'd like to think that I'm not a *complete* idiot."

Julius scratched his chin. "If time permits, remind me to provide you with some instruction in the proper way to handle a blade. I'd prefer that a man known to have defeated me in battle not be..." Julius seemed to grope for a word.

"Completely inept?" Subaru suggested with a smile.

"Hopeless?" Emilia chimed in.

Subaru gave her a hurt look and Emilia smiled at him fondly.

Subaru sighed. "I hope that we can get Griest and his cronies somewhere secure soon. I really want to let these spirits go..."

"Is it tiring to hold onto them?" Emilia asked.

"Not tiring, exactly," Subaru groped for an explanation. "But it is distracting and..." He hesitated.

"And?" Emilia asked.

He sighed. "Mili, you know better than most what a serious injury taking away someone's spirit companion is. Malcolm an Griest certainly deserves to be punished for his crimes but I'm not sure that even he deserves to be separated from his partners. I'll feel better when those three are someplace that they can be contained and I can give their spirits back to them."

Emilia nodded with a knowing look on her face.

Julius was looking at Subaru speculatively. "In spite of all... you are a kind man, Subaru Natsuki," Julius murmured finally. "This... surprises me."

Emilia glowered at Julius.

Subaru flushed, unsure of what to say to that. "Look, Julius, I'm... I'm really sorry about what I did to you and your spirits," He said finally. "I'd never used that ability on spirits before. I wasn't sure what the effects would be. It was... reckless of me to use my power on your spirits without knowing the consequences," He admitted with a sigh.

Julius frowned and thought for a long time. Finally, he sighed and bowed his head. "No. You spoke truly when you reminded me that I myself had brought my dear spirit companions into our duel. In so doing, I made them legitimate targets under any rule of warfare. I must own the responsibility for my recklessness myself."

Subaru opened his mouth but before he could respond:

"Subaru! Emilia!"

They turned to see Anri racing toward them. The girl flung herself into Emilia's arms.

Emilia and Anri held each other close for a long moment. "I can't believe that you came all this way to save me," She said with tears in her eyes. "And you saved my entire realm! With Malcolm and Griest captured, the war is over!"

"That's the best news that I've heard in days!" Subaru said. "Hey, is your arm better?" He asked, noticing her sling was gone.

Anri flexed it a few times. "Yeah, they were kind enough to have a healer finish the mending. They needed to heal me anyway after I tried to..." She trailed off awkwardly.

Julius bowed his head sadly.

"Tried to?" Subaru prompted, looking at Julius and Anri in confusion.

Anri put a smile on her face. "Never mind. I'm just glad that it didn't work. I'm feeling fine, thank you."

Subaru shrugged. "That's great! Oh, and before I forget, why don't you take this back?" Subaru said, unbuckling Anri's rapier and handing it to her.

Anri took it with watery eyes. "You brought honor to my ancestral weapon, Subaru Natsuki."

Subaru looked awkward. "You know, I'm very uncomfortable with all this praising. Can we just go back to everyone thinking that I'm just a lucky idiot?"

"Don't worry, Subaru," Emilia said sympathetically, patting his shoulder. "That won't take long."

Anri laughed.

Subaru gave her a look of annoyance and she responded with a mischievous grin.

Subaru felt the guilt on his heart lighten slightly.

A few hours later, Antilles's men were preparing to head back to Siros. Antilles and Anri were having another long discussion. The Acolyte Knights were under heavy guard. Without their spirits or weapons, they were no serious threat.

Subaru and Emilia stood in the forest not far away with their arms wrapped around one another. Their legs were both wobbling and it was unclear who was supporting whom.

Patrasche dozed nearby.

Subaru yawned so wide that he thought his head might split open. "Mili, when was the last time that we slept?"

Emilia frowned and shook her head. "Honestly, I'm not sure, Subaru," She confessed. "I think that's probably a bad sign." She thought about it. "It's been at least three days now."

Subaru rubbed his face. "You know, Mili, I think that we're doing something wrong with our lives," He moaned.

"If we are all preparing to depart," Julius murmured, walking over to them. "Perhaps I should take my leave as well."

"You might want to talk to Anri before you take off, Jules," Subaru yawned again. "She might be able to help you get back quicker. Man, I hope that we reach Siros tonight. All I want is a bite to eat and a soft bed to collapse in."

"I feel the same way," Emilia moaned, burrowing her face into his shoulder and sounding like she was already half asleep. "That sounds heavenly."

Julius looked off into the distance thoughtfully. "A sound point. If the Princess could be persuaded to lend me a wyvern, it would save me a journey of many days," He murmured.

"Worth asking," Subaru shrugged. "Mili, I have to sit down or I'm just going to fall over."

"Agreed," Emilia murmured as the pair slipped to the ground and leaned back against a tree trunk. Subaru wrapped his arms around Emilia and she closed her eyes with a smile as she cuddled closer.

Julius started off into the distance thoughtfully. "I must return as soon as possible," He mused. "I must reassure Lady Anastasia of my continued good health. And the sages' council will be jubilant now that the risk of war from Gusteko has been at least temporarily removed."

Subaru snickered. "If you say so. I've never seen anything 'jubilant' in those cranky old men!"

Julius gave him a slight smile. "Perhaps not."

Subaru frowned. "Wait a second, what war?" He asked in confusion.

Julius's smile faded. "I assumed you knew. Gusteko has threatened war because of you!"

Subaru and Emilia stared at him. "What?!" They asked together.

Julius stared at them with thinly veiled irritation. "You attacked a village and an army camp in the Princess's company! How did you *expect* Gusteko to respond?"

"Wait a second!" Subaru protested. "We didn't attack Iruk, *Elsa* did and while we're on the subject, if Emilia hadn't stopped her, Elsa absolutely would have wiped out the entire village!"

Julius glanced away. "I am aware," He admitted reluctantly. "Aldebaran, Felix and I investigated the village. There were no casualties at all but there was significant property damage."

Emilia looked guilty.

"Would you rather the cost have been in property or lives?" Subaru asked pointedly.

"That is not the point, Subaru Natsuki!" Julius said heatedly. "Your actions have tangible consequences on the world around you! Something you seem to be steadfast in your determination to ignore! You can not simply wander around in another country doing as you please! Your actions reflect on Lagunica!"

"Why?!" Subaru objected. "I only lived there for two months and I'm pretty sure that I'm a permanent exile at this point! Why does *anything* I do reflect on Lagunica?"

"You *are* a candidate for the throne," Julius said sternly. "This has yet to be stripped of you and your actions reflect on the kingdom!"

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Perfect. The one time that the sages' council could have done me a favor by acting quickly, they drag their feet."

"Subaru Natsuki, by your actions, you are strongly implying an alliance between Siros and Lagunica! The other provinces of Gusteko will not just be able to ignore that!"

"There *is* no alliance, Julius!" Subaru reminded him. "I am just a private citizen with a little magic and I moved to Gusteko to get away from politics. What makes this any different than a thousand other emigres?"

"Do not be obtuse," Julius snapped. "Your power goes beyond anything that I have ever encountered. It is conceivable that your strength might even exceed Reinhard van Astrea's! The sages' council can not simply let you depart to another nation on your own impulse."

Subaru stared at Julius for a long moment. "Julius. You make it sound very oddly like the sages' council thinks that I belong to them," He said in a warning voice.

Julius shifted awkwardly. "Each nation guards its national assets carefully. Reinhard van Astrea, Cecilus Segmunt of Vollachia, Halibel of Kararagi, and 'the Mad Prince' of Gusteko. Any of these individuals leaving their birth nation behind would fundamentally shift the balance of power on this continent!" Julius took a deep breath. "You do have my sympathies for being entangled in this situation which you did you ask for but that does not absolve you of the need to use your power responsibly. You must return to Lagunica immediately."

Subaru shook his head. "Julius," He sighed. "First of all, if Emilia and I went back to Lagunica, we're both going to be in mortal danger since lots of people want to kill Emilia, so that's a hard pass. Secondly, how does my going back to Lagunica preserve *any* kind of balance?! You just said that each kingdom has *one* person who is exceedingly powerful right now. If I went back to Lagunica, it would have two. How is that going to work out?"

Julius made a face. "A valid point," He admitted. "However, if excessive power is to be vested in any kingdom, I would prefer it to be in my own nation whose goals I understand and can rely on."

Subaru shook his head. "No deal, Julius. Emilia and I are going to find a way to restore everyone's memories of her, then we plan to rescue our spirit partners, and find a nice, quiet place to disappear. The world can forget all about us and we'll just ignore the world."

Julius's face twisted into a sneer. "Do you really expect the world to simply *forget* about you?" He scoffed.

Subaru shrugged. "If we can stay quiet for long enough, sure it will! But that's in the future. First, we need to help Anri finish cleaning up this mess."

Julius looked up at Anri who was still talking to Captain Antilles. "Another matter of concern," Julius murmured. "Have you considered the consequences of your rescue?"

"What consequences?"

"You destroyed a sizable army, Subaru Natsuki," Julius said patiently. "And much of it did not belong to House Griest. The other houses will surely be incensed by the lives you took and the damage you caused."

Subaru flushed. "Hey! Those soldiers may not have all been working for Griest but they were all guarding Anri and they all tried to get her back."

"This is true," Julius replied. "And by a strict interpretation of the 'rules of war,' you were indeed within the right. However, the other Houses have been badly weakened by this disaster and they are likely to blame the Princess for this. At this point, Siros has effectively conquered Sanshi by depleting much of its manpower and capturing its Prince. This

will grant House Ithil a vast amount of power. A noble who suddenly surges in power and influence often makes the rest of the nobility nervous," Julius warned.

Subaru sighed. "Julius, what the hell else should I have done?" He asked incredulously.

"Nothing," Julius admitted. "You did rightly to save the Princess. And... myself," He admitted reluctantly. "However, a righteous intent will not protect you from the consequences of your actions."

Subaru rolled his eyes but before he could respond, a figure lurched out of the forest shadows.

Julius immediately put his hand on his sword.

"Subaru? Emilia?" She whispered.

Subaru and Emilia stared up at the blond woman. Her formally fine clothing was mud splattered and in shambles. Her arms had several deep scratches and her face was drawn as if she'd been on short sleep for days.

"Victoire?!" Subaru asked.

Victoire coughed. "Is... the princess alright?" She asked weakly.

"Victoire!" Anri cheered, rushing over to her.

To the woman's clear surprise, Anri caught her in a hug. "I'm so glad that you're safe! Are you alright?" Anri asked.

Victoire sighed. "I have had a fucking *miserable* time of it! I was attacked at the inn. Something is giving our foes clear vision of our entire intelligence network. When I figure out who's responsible for all this shit, I'm going put the little fucker into a juicer and squeeze-,"

"Victoire!" Anri said, looking revolted.

Victoire looked at the Princess apologetically. "Well, like I said, I've had a shitty couple of days. Did you ever figure out how the fuck they know our every frigging move?"

Anri scowled. "When I get a chance to interrogate Malcolm an Griest, that will be my first question. Honestly, I used to think that we had an informant but only magic could give him this kind of knowledge of our movements."

Victoire trembled with exhaustion. "I barely escaped that crappy inn with my life," She admitted. "I was shit out of ideas so I tried to make my way back to Siros while trying to avoid all the fucking people who were trying to kill me! I checked a drop box and I found out that you'd been captured by House Griest so I came here as fast as I fucking could. Are you... alright?"

Anri grinned at her. "Never better, Victoire. Subaru, Emilia, and Julius rescued me *and* ended the war!"

Victoire stared at them wide eyed for a moment. Finally, she gave Subaru and Emilia a shy smile. "Damn! Maybe I was wrong about you fuckers!"

Subaru gave a weary chuckle. "Thanks, Victoire. That means a lot coming from you," Subaru sighed.

"We're going to be headed back to Siros now, Victoire. You should come with us," Anri told her.

Victoire nodded. She tried to take a step and nearly fell, forcing Anri to catch her and lower her gently to the ground.

"Thank you, Princess," Victoire coughed. "Also, I heard from your grandfather before coming here. He's been worried sick about you. He sent this letter through the network," Victoire handed her a sealed envelope.

"Please note that the seal is unbroken," Victoire said as if by route.

"I note that the seal is not broken," Anri said at the same time. She spoke in a bored voice as if she'd heard this many times before.

Anri carelessly ripped open the letter.

Anri read it with a huge smile on her face. As she read further, she put a hand to her mouth. Her smile broadened but tears started to well up in her eyes and she looked like she might cry.

Subaru felt an urge to look away and give her some privacy.

Anri cleared her throat. "Well, we should start heading back to Siros."

"Right behind you, Princess," Victoire said in a weary voice. "I promised you that I'd get you home after all!"

"Yes, you did," Anri smiled at her. "Also, Victoire, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, do you think that you could call me 'Anri' from now on?"

Subaru almost laughed. The normally dour and cynical Victoire lit up like the sun and she nodded with a foolish smile.

Subaru coughed. "Uh, Anri?" He murmured. "Any chance of a wagon ride to the city? I'm pretty sure that if Emilia and I try to ride Patrasche to Siros, we're both liable to pass out and fall off."

"Easily arranged," Anri smiled. "Captain," She said turning to Antilles who was just walking over. "Can you locate a wagon for our friends?"

"Of course, Princess," Antilles said slowly, staring at Emilia doubtfully. "Um, begging your pardon, Princess, but do you really mean to bring a witch back to Siros?"

Anri gave the Captain a look of such rage that the old man took an involuntary step back. "Emilia is *not* a witch, Captain!"

"Right!" The Captain agreed hastily. "But... are you sure you want to bring her back with us? I mean, folks might react badly to their princess associating with a... half-devil."

Julius scowled at him.

Emilia flinched and Subaru face-palmed. "Antilles!" Subaru shouted. "The only reason I haven't already flattened your nose is that I'm too fucking tired to move right now!"

Anri drew herself up to her full height. "Captain, you will *not* speak so to my cherished companions in my presence!" Anri said in a very formal tone. "For too long has Siros followed the ignorant, offensive practices of the rest of Gusteko in regards to demi-humans. I mean to put an end to this foolishness, right here and now!" She said firmly.

Antilles looked dubious but he was smart enough to hold his tongue and simply bow low.

As the sun set, they arrived at Siros.

Subaru and Emilia were rudely awakened by the sounds of applause and thunderous cheering. They sprang up in the wagon, looking around in confusion.

The entire city had turned out to celebrate the end of the war and the return of the Princess. They lined the street to the palace for a mile. Siros was a fraction of the size of the capitol of Lagunica or Ganaks but it still boasted a population of many thousand and it looked like they had all come out to welcome the Princess home.

The military procession back to Siros instantly turned into an informal parade. Anri and Julius led the way, mounted on Patrasche. The riding dragon was clearly enjoying all the attention. Anri was graciously waving and receiving cheers from her people.

Subaru and Emilia followed directly behind them, looking completely out of place in their open-box wagon that was being pulled along by a grumpy old Earth dragon.

The entire city seemed deliriously happy to see their princess returned safely and bringing victory and peace with her.

Then the locals saw the wagon following Anri.

Because they'd just been awoken from a sound sleep, there had been no time to pull up their hoods and Emilia's hair and ears were plain for all to see.

Emilia started to pull up her hood and then let it go with a sigh, realizing that there was no point.

The locals cheered at the top of their lungs for the Princess but after she had passed their gaze fell onto Emilia and their expressions shifted into worry and concern. The citizens shifted from cheering to murmuring to one another in worry.

Subaru sighed. "I'm starting to get the impression that Siros is a lot less progressive than Anri thought."

Emilia made a face. "Well," She said slowly. "They're not throwing things at us yet. Or trying to kill us. Honestly, this is the nicest town that we've seen in quite some time."

"That's true," Subaru admitted. "And sad," Subaru added.

Emilia chuckled for a moment but then her face grew grave. "I don't know, Subaru," She murmured. "Maybe staying in Siros isn't the best idea."

Subaru shrugged. "We don't have to stay here if we don't want. We'll help Anri get settled and go through the Archives and hopefully find a cure for your curse. Once we know how to reverse the curse we'll go find it, cure you, recover the spirits, and then we can disappear to wherever you want."

Emilia chuckled and shook her head with a rueful smile. "Subaru, you make everything sound so easy."

Subaru laughed. "Well, *something* ought to be easy after all this! I don't see how any of that could be harder than pissing off two separate kingdoms!"

Emilia giggled and they watched as Anri received accolades from her people and flowers were thrown ahead of her as they made their way to the palace in the center of the city.

"Anri certainly is popular," Emilia observed.

Subaru shrugged. "It's good for her. It'll help build up her confidence," He said. He paused. "Although it did just occur to me that we don't seem to be getting any of the credit for ending this war."

"Does that bother you?" Emilia asked.

Subaru snorted. "Nah. Actually, it's pretty refreshing. But I am still pissed off about the fact that we will *definitely* be given full credit for trying to burn down Ganaks!" He grumbled.

Emilia smiled fondly at him. "Subaru, I *still* don't understand how in the world you managed to do that!"

"I *didn't* do it!" Subaru protested. "It wasn't my fault!"

Emilia looked at him skeptically but her smile broadened. "Subaru, I have a very hard time believing that something just *happened* to explode while you were there and yet you were in no way involved," She said teasingly.

Subaru sighed. "It really is 'pick on me' day, isn't it?" He chuckled.

Emilia gave him a peck on the cheek. "You know, it might be for the best that we're here. We're distracting the people from thinking about another very important question regarding Anri," She mused.

Subaru frowned. "What question is that?" Subaru asked.

Emilia smirked at Patrasche's riders. "Wondering who that knight is and why he's riding with Anri..."

Subaru chuckled. "I don't know. I think that everyone speculating about what their relationship is, just might please Anri. And as far as I know, Julius *is* single..."

The procession reached the palace and Anri and Julius dismounted Patrasche. A groom was standing by to take the dragon from them.

Subaru and Emilia climbed out of the wagon.

"Hey!" Subaru called to the groom. "Take good care of her. She's had a long road. She needs a little rest and relaxation!"

The groom looked at the strange man in the dirty robe with confusion, probably wondering who he was and if he could really give him orders but the groom just nodded and led Patrasche away.

A group of soldiers led Malcolm, Deann, and Duncan out of a heavily guarded carriage. Their arms were chained together. Deann's face was haughtily defiant, Duncan's grim, and Malcolm's was livid.

"Princess," Captain Antilles said, walking up to Anri. "With your permission, I'll bring these prisoners to the dungeon."

"Very well, Captain," Anri approved.

"I'll find someplace suitably uncomfortable for them," Antilles smirked.

Anri folded her arms across her chest. "Captain," Anri said in a warning tone. "They are not to be mistreated."

Antilles grumbled something under his breath but nodded.

Anri turned to face her friends. "Come inside! I've already sent word ahead to prepare a feast! My Uncle and Grandfather are expected to arrive tonight as well. My dearest friends and my rescuers many times over, our fighting days are done!"

Subaru and Julius shared a pained look.

It's weird to be on the same wavelength as Julius but I'm pretty sure that we both just thought 'jinx.' Or whatever the equivalent term is around here.

"I'll be along in a minute," Subaru said with a yawn. "I'm just going to go check on Patrasche real quick and then I'll be up."

"Don't take too long, Subaru!" Anri said cheerfully. "I want to eat!"

"I shouldn't be long," Subaru replied, walking away. "Unless I get lost in another maze-like palace and need to find a servant to direct me..." He muttered to himself.

Julius and Victoire went to freshen up while Anri brought Emilia directly to a large and elaborately furnished room.

There was a massive canopied bed in the center as well as many elegant chairs and a writing desk. It even had a private bathroom.

"Emilia, this will be your room. Yours and Subaru's. It will be set aside permanently, always unoccupied to use whenever you wish. I hope that you'll use it often."

"I hope so too, Anri," Emilia said warmly. The girls took their seats in a pair of comfortable chairs that let them look out a huge window over the enormous palace courtyard. It was dark outside but the lights were shining in the city not far off.

Anri hesitated. "Emilia, have the two of you... thought about what you might do after finding your cure and reuniting

with your spirits?"

Emilia sighed. "Not really. That's occupying all of our attention right now. Once we accomplish that, we still need to lift the curse on my people. They're... frozen solid."

Anri nodded. "Yeah, I know. I hope that you can find a solution to that problem in the Grand Archives as well. But... once your quests are complete, I was hoping that you and Subaru would consider coming back to Siros. I'd like you to dwell in the palace with me. Forever, if you're willing."

Emilia frowned. "Why? I mean, that's certainly very generous of you but why are you so anxious for us to stay?"

Anri coughed. "Well. I feel like we've become very good friends after everything that we've been through together and... I don't have many friends," She admitted. "Honestly, I have no friends left after the war except Victoire. My closest companions were my Shadow bodyguards and they're all dead now. It's... hard to find people that you can trust when you're royalty, you know," She said with a somber smile.

"I'm sorry," Emilia replied.

Anri reached out to Emilia and took her hand. "Emilia, I really want you and Subaru to consider becoming my closest advisers. I'm likely to be crowned within a few years and I need your help. You told me how you dreamed about making a world of equality between humans and demi-humans. We can start that together, right here! You could help me prove to everyone that demi-humans in Siros are welcome and that their rights will be protected. If Subaru lived here and kept inventing then in ten years, Siros would be the technological hub of the entire continent!"

Emilia frowned. "That does sound pretty nice," She admitted. "And I'm as reluctant to say goodbye as you are. We'd have to resolve our current problems first, of course."

"Of course," Anri nodded. "And I'll help you in whatever way I can."

"But," Emilia said slowly. "After we get our lives back, I... I was really hoping to settle down somewhere with Subaru. Maybe in the forest and... start our family. I was hoping to get away from... all the craziness of the powerful people and nobility."

Anri chuckled. "There's enough room in the palace for as large of a family as you could want!" Anri assured her. She hesitated. "As for the rest," Anri smiled sadly. "I'm not sure that it would be that easy, Mili."

"What do you mean?"

Anri took a moment to organize her thoughts. "OK, so I don't know if you realize this but... you and Subaru have literally shaken the *world* with your footsteps," Anri said seriously. "You're changed the fates of whole nations in a matter of weeks! You and Subaru represent *power*," Anri said gently. "And people tend to gravitate toward power. They're either hoping to make use of it or they feel threatened by it. I'm not sure that the two of you could really just... disappear," Anri concluded sadly.

Emilia looked stricken.

Anri chuckled ruefully. "Yeah, I know how you feel. I have a similar problem. Some days, I wish that I could just go running off down the road and never look back."

Emilia shook her head. "You'd never do that, Anri," Emilia said fondly. "I know you too well. You're too responsible to ever walk away from your family and your people."

Anri shook her head with a knowingly smile. "Yeah, I know you too, Emilia. You have the same problem that I do," Anri pointed out. "You don't have it in you to just go off into the forest somewhere and disappear. You'll always try to help the people around you. I'm absolutely certain that you'll spend the rest of your life trying to help. The only question is how."

The Acolyte Knights were marched in chains around the castle toward the dungeon entrance. All of their hands were bound by the same length of chain as they were gently led along in single file.

Malcolm was trying to muster up whatever strength he had left. True, the demon Subaru Natsuki had torn away his bonded spirits but Malcolm had been a master spirit arts user for decades and he could also draw on ambient magic from the lesser spirits in the world around him. Malcolm had been building up a magical charge for hours now, waiting for the right opportunity.

The Siros soldiers led them through an old and poorly maintained covered bridge over an almost dry riverbed. The floor was sound but the roof and walls were full of holes. There was some sign that the castle staff had been trying to repair this bridge. There was construction equipment lying all around. Malcolm specifically noticed a block and tackle hanging out one of the holes in the wall. A large pile of timber lying below in the stream bed was tied to that rope.

Malcolm also spotted a burning torch hung on a wall of the bridge and quickly made his plan.

Deann will get out of here. If it costs me my life, my daughter will get home safely!

Canmore is safe but he's just a boy. He needs someone to guide him.

"Duncan," Malcolm snapped.

"Sir?" Duncan said in surprise. Malcolm hadn't spoken in hours. And he almost *never* willingly spoke to Duncan at all.

"You have precisely one chance to convince me that you're good enough for my daughter!" Malcolm grated, staring hard at the tackle.

Duncan followed his gaze and his eyes widened.

Malcolm summoned up all of the magic he'd gathered and with a mighty heave, he broke the chain around his wrists.

The soldiers were too shocked to react as Malcolm grabbed the burning torch off the wall and swung it at their faces, forcing them to stumble back to protect themselves.

Duncan and Deann quickly pulled the chain out from their own shackles.

Malcolm threw himself at the soldiers giving them no time to think or react. Fire is a potent weapon in close quarter combat and Malcolm blinded the soldiers by swiping the torch at their faces and then followed up with powerful punches that broke bones.

Some of the soldiers bolted away screaming as the torch's fire seared their faces and burned their eyes.

One soldier's clothes caught fire and he was forced to drop to the ground and roll, desperately trying to put it out.

A horn echoed across the ground as the alarm was sounded.

"Get her out of here!" Malcolm roared.

With neither her magic nor her swords, Deann was almost helpless but Duncan was a powerful man and he beat the soldiers back with heavy blows.

Deann shouted, "Father! Hurry and-"

Duncan grabbed Deann around the waist and jumped off the bridge, grabbing onto the rope.

"No!" Deann screamed, reaching back for her father.

Malcolm fought like a lion to protect his cub. He had already accepted his death as long as Deann got away safely. He had no weapon except for the torch but he was a mountain of muscle and he forced the soldiers back step by step, using the heat of the flames.

The tackle lowered Duncan and Deann to the ground safely and quickly, the massive pile of timber going up the other way.

Duncan let go of the rope when they reached the ground and the timber fell like a rock. Malcolm heard the timber smash into the ground and knew that the tackle had been reset for his own escape.

Malcolm prepared to make his own leap to safety when he heard a blade being drawn from behind him.

Malcolm spun around to protect his back and he thrust the torch toward his new foe but the man's blade knocked it aside easily and Malcolm found a sword at his throat.

Malcolm looked down and saw the monster Subaru Natsuki, staring at him with cold appraising eyes. He'd swiped a sword from a wounded soldier, lying on the floor of the bridge, and he now held it against Malcolm's throat, hard enough to dimple the skin.

"OK, Malcolm," Subaru whispered. "You want to come dead or alive? It makes no difference to me."

Malcolm fumed and dropped his torch. The flames sputtered and went out.

The soldiers rushed up to Malcolm to secure him. The ones knocked to the ground slowly regained their feet with help from their fellows but only a few seemed seriously injured.

Malcolm glanced down over the dry riverbed and saw Duncan fleeing as fast as he could, Deann thrown over his shoulder and beating his back with her fists as she commanded him to let her go back.

Ha! That halfwit was finally useful!

"Do what you want to me," Malcolm taunted, as the soldiers bound his hands. His face twisted in a grin of savage triumph. "My family will endure. That's all that matters. Even if you torture me to death, I've still had the last laugh."

Subaru stared up into his bearded face, his expression inscrutable. Finally, he nodded with a sour expression on his face. "I guess I have to respect *that* at least, Griest," He said begrudgingly.

Malcolm looked at him in surprise.

"Lord Subaru," Captain Antilles said, having finished tending to his injured men. "Thank you again for your assistance. If not for you, they would have all escaped!"

"Not a problem, Captain," Subaru said handing the sword back to the injured soldier.

Antilles sighed. "I'm not looking forward to telling the regent about this..."

Subaru looked at Malcolm. "Please hurry up and put this guy somewhere he can't stir up anymore trouble. Also, you should send search parties after those two."

Malcolm snorted. *They'll never find them. I taught Deann wood lore myself. She knows how to disappear and survive in the forest.*

"Right away, Lord Subaru," Antilles saluted and the men started to drag Malcolm away. "Forget the dungeon! Bring this man to Kalicos prison right away!"

Subaru watched the soldiers drag Malcolm away and then shook his head. He glanced at his left arm which was still swarming with balls of light. His mind was filled with strange voices that were constantly whispering loving endearments.

"And since those two are still on the loose, that means I need to keep holding onto you guys," Subaru grumbled to the spirits.

Subaru returned to the main entrance and saw Emilia, Anri, Julius, and Victoire come flying out. The horns and other alarms had brought them out of the palace on the run.

"I can't believe that we already lost them!" Anri said in despair after Subaru explained the situation. She buried her face in her hands. "My Uncle is going to be beside himself!"

"You still have the important one," Subaru reassured her. "As long as you have Malcolm, I doubt Sanshi would dare to attack."

Anri sighed. "Yeah. Thank you for that, Subaru. If not for you, we would have lost all of them."

Anri shook her head and made a show of putting aside her worries. A rictus grin spread across her face. "Well, there's a banquet waiting for us and it's getting cold! Let's all go and dig in!"

Everyone followed Anri into the palace and down the halls. Anri and Emilia were chatting animatedly and Victoire followed silently behind.

Subaru noticed that Julius was walking slowly and looked like he had a lot on his mind.

"Something wrong, Jules?" Subaru whispered.

Weird that I would ask him that. Funny. I guess sometime following that battle, something changed for the two of us. At least... I don't feel like we hate each other anymore. I wouldn't call us friends but... I wouldn't exactly call us enemies either...

Weird.

Julius looked pensive as they stopped to talk. "Earlier today, Captain Antilles asked if I would consider accepting a position in Siros," He whispered.

Subaru chuckled. "Doesn't waste any time, does he?"

Julius shook his head. "Under normal circumstances, I would have refused immediately but I still owe a debt of my life to Princess Kairei. All the same, I have sworn my loyalty to Lady Anastasia. I confess that I am deeply conflicted. If Princess Kairei wishes me to stay-"

"Jules," Subaru cut him off. "I am *sure* that Anri didn't ask Antilles to do this. As a matter of fact, I doubt that she'll be happy when she finds out that Antilles went behind her back."

Julius looked down the hall as the girls entered the banquet room. "Servants often overrule their master's wishes when they fear that they are in danger," Julius said darkly.

"What do you mean?"

"Subaru," Julius said, stepping closer and lowering his voice. "Captain Antilles informed me that he fears that the Princess is still in peril. There's as yet no explanation for how Sanshi forces were able to locate the Princess or how they destroyed so many of her Shadows and safe-houses."

Subaru frowned. "Anri mentioned that but she seems to think that they were using some kind of magic to track her. They did find you in the deep forest after all. I'm sure that we can squeeze some answers out of Malcolm an Griest."

Julius bowed his head. "Subaru Natsuki," Julius said in a tight voice. "I am... uncertain of my course. My duty requires me to return to report to the kingdom and to Lady Anastasia with all speed but... I fear for Princess Kairei's safety. Can I truly depart in good conscience?"

Subaru frowned. He patted Julius's shoulder. "Look, Jules. Emilia and I aren't going anywhere for a while. We definitely won't abandon Anri until we're sure that she'll be safe. Even if we're spending most of our time out in the Archives, we'll still be close enough to keep an eye on things. You should head back to the capitol as soon as you can. There's got to be a lot of people worried about you. After all, you will need to fly that wyvern back to Siros after you make your report. That means that you can double back here and check things out before you take the long, slow trip back

overland."

Julius nodded slowly. "Thank you, Subaru Natsuki, for your wise counsel. I must endeavor to satisfy all my obligations without fail. Lady Anastasia is doubtlessly worried about me. I must return straight away to reassure her and to ensure that the sages' council does not escalate hostilities with Gusteko."

Subaru nodded. "Give Anastasia my regards. Now that I'm out of the running for the throne, I'm sure that our relationship will improve greatly. Tell her that I'm still very interesting in pursuing a business deal with her for my inventions."

Julius nodded. "I most surely will, Subaru. I hope that my Lady and the kingdom will grant my request to return here forthwith."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Also, you might tell Anastasia that there are going to be serious economic opportunities in Siros shortly. Once the other Sanshi army is gone, the trade lanes will open up again and commerce is going to surge. Siros has been through a devastating war and they'll need significant materials to rebuild. Anastasia could make a fortune if she positioned herself properly before that. Point *that* out to her and she might even order you to come back to ensure that Anri stays safe. *And* to make sure that Anri is properly grateful to Anastasia when the dust finally settles..." He said with some amusement.

Julius gave Subaru a pained look. "To paint such a vivid picture to Lady Anastasia would feel very much as if I sought to manipulate her. I am... uncertain that this is knightly behavior, Subaru."

Subaru chuckled. "Very perceptive of you, Jules, because I'm *not* a knight," He said in amusement. "Look, all you have to do is just tell Anastasia what *I* said, OK? She'll read between the lines. Anastasia and I have always understood one another very well."

Julius nodded. "I will do so."

"One more thing, Julius," Subaru said lowering his voice. "When you go back to the capitol, wear a hood over your face and don't take it off until you can declare yourself in a crowd."

"What do you mean?" Julius frowned.

"We found the bodies of the Ganaks soldiers who attacked you. Griest's men massacred them. *That* means that, whoever gave the order for you to be killed, they probably don't know that they failed yet. Make sure that lots of people know that you came back from Gusteko safely so they don't have a chance to try again."

Julius nodded slowly. "I will be guided by you in this," He said.

Subaru nodded and the pair continued down to the banquet hall.

The banquet table was easily able to seat forty and it was piled high with food. Subaru thought this was an enormous waste but he kept his mouth shut. Anri didn't need to be second-guessed right now. Subaru and Emilia dug in with gusto. They'd eaten nothing for two weeks but field rations and a few vegetables.

Anri was nursing a glass of wine. "What an adventure. It's like I've been living in one of my romance novels! I was lost in the woods, hunted by assassins, and all alone. Then I met heroes that protected me and helped me to win a war!"

Subaru chuckled. "I hope that you're not looking to write a 'sequel' any time soon, Anri."

Anri laughed. "No, thank you! I've had my fill of danger and peril for a while. I just want to have a nice peaceful couple of years where my people are safe to rebuild and lick their wounds! My next adventure will definitely be found in the pages of a book!"

"That fucking works for me," Victoire commented, taking a long swig of wine. "I've dragged my ass across Gusteko lengthwise four or five times since all this shit started!"

"You may wish to watch your back, Subaru Natsuki," Julius said calmly, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "You have singlehandedly reshaped the political landscape of two nations in a matter of weeks. Kararagi and Vollachia may already be conspiring to murder you before you take an interest in their affairs as well."

Subaru stared at Julius. "Julius," Subaru cracked a smile. "Did you just make a joke?"

"Of course not," He said with a straight face. "Perish the thought."

Anri laughed.

Subaru chuckled. "Any word on your relatives?" He asked Anri.

Anri nodded. "My Uncle should be here soon. My grandfather will hopefully be here sometime tomorrow. And Gael is with my Uncle as well. I'm dying to see him."

"Your brother?" Emilia recalled.

Anri nodded. "I hope that he's OK..."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Wait, so your Uncle took your brother... on a military campaign?!" He asked incredulously.

Anri's face darkened. "Gael had *better* be OK," She grumbled.

Julius sighed and stood up from the table. "I am completely full. And alas, though I would joyfully remain here with you all for much longer, my duty beckons and I must return home."

"No! Not yet!" Anri protested.

Victoire stood up. "Oh what the hell, I need to stretch my legs anyway. I'll show you the way to the wyvern roost, Sir Julius."

Julius approached Anri and delicately kissed her hand.

Anri turned bright red.

"Princess," Julius said softly. "I owe you my life and I shall never forget that debt. You are a woman of exceptional courage and character. My life has been greatly enriched just by coming to know you."

Anri's breath was coming fast and she seemed at a loss for words.

Subaru carefully hid a smile.

"You offered to do battle to protect me against many foes, Sir Julius," Anri spoke up. "I assure you, you will always be welcome in my halls."

Julius smiled at her. "I am truly grateful, Princess Kairei. The more often I find myself in your divine company the better shall I be pleased."

Anri blushed and broke into a broad smile.

Julius smiled at her and turned his attention to Subaru and Emilia. His face wasn't friendly but there was no hostility in it.

"Subaru Natsuki, Miss Emilia," Julius spoke in a neutral tone. "It seems that it is our time to part for now."

Subaru made a face. "Julius," Subaru said awkwardly. "We've never been friends but you're a good man. Maybe we'll get a chance to know one another better when all of the dust from this mess finally settles. Please give my fond regards to Lady Anastasia and tell her that no matter how the royal selection ends, I hope that we will have a long and productive business relationship."

"I most surely will, Subaru Natsuki," Julius said, taking his hand.

Subaru hesitated and took a deep breath. "Also, Julius, would you perhaps consider doing me a favor?"

Julius looked intrigued. "You did save my life," Julius said slowly. "What would you ask of me?"

Subaru sighed and looked at the spirits dancing around Julius's wrist with longing. "We had... two spirits in our care. I think... I hope that Reinhard and Felt are looking after them now. I have no concerns that they are being mistreated but Reinhard and Felt don't know much about taking care of spirits. If it would be at all possible, could you look in on them and ensure that they are as safe and comfortable as possible?"

Julius nodded, his face sympathetic. "Consider it done, Subaru Natsuki. I will seek them out straight away and ensure that they are well kept. And I will convey to them that your heart is desolate because of your separation."

Subaru gave him a sad smile. "Thank you, Julius. I am deeply in your debt," He said with a bow.

Julius looked back at Anri. "I wish you to know that I am inordinately proud to have known you, my lady, and my life is far better for it. I am grateful to have shared in a small way in your adventures. It was far more than a man like myself deserves. I hope that we will soon be together again, united once more for mirth and celebration."

The knight gave a formal bow and then followed Victoire out of the hall.

Subaru and Emilia pretended not to notice Anri's tears at his departure.

Captain Antilles had returned to report that Malcolm an Griest was secure in a cell in a nearby prison and Subaru had released the spirits in his care with relief.

Deann and Duncan are still out there but I can't just hold onto the spirits indefinitely. The next time that I need to use Indomitable I'll have to let them go.

It's better for everyone tracking them to just assume that they have their magic rather than to have it sprung on them by surprise. Besides, if Julius is any example, they'll take a good long time to recover their power.

After dinner, the trio retreated to Anri's private rooms which were big enough to be a luxurious apartment all by themselves.

The group had barely sat down when a tall man with ashen blond hair and a long, haggard face walked into the room. His clothes were muddy and traveled stained.

"Uncle Radu!" Anri said, jumping up and giving the man a hug.

The man held her tight. "Oh, Anri!" He sighed. "I've been so worried about you!"

"I'm sorry, Uncle," She said contritely.

The pair separated and Radu laughed. "Now I find out that my little niece has grown into a hero! I want to hear the full story! I've been hearing a thousand different tales the entire way home and I can't believe half of them!"

Anri giggled then her face grew serious. "Uncle, is Gael alright?"

Radu smiled. "He's fine, Anri," He soothed.

"When I heard that you'd taken him with you the front, I thought-"

"I know," Radu said calmly. "I had no intention of letting him fight! But after the first safe-house was attacked, I had to take him out of the castle. I couldn't tell where it would be safe to leave Gael so I just kept him with me. I can't say that he enjoyed it but he *is* doing well."

Anri sighed in relief.

"Why don't you go see him?" Radu said gently. "It will give me a chance to wash half the dust of the continent off my face and then we can all talk about your big adventure!"

Anri nodded. "That sounds great. Why don't you two come with me," She said to Subaru and Emilia. "I'd like you to meet him."

They nodded and followed Anri out of the room.

Boy, that kid must be excited to see his sister again. I'm looking forward to this. It'll be just like having Petra around again.

Well, if Petra was a boy, I mean. It'll be just like having Lucas around again?

Nah. Lucas is a little pain in the neck.

Anri led them down the hall and to a room with a pair of soldiers standing guard outside.

Subaru frowned. "Anri, guards?" He asked.

She nodded sadly. "We don't want him to go wandering without anyone there to watch him..."

Subaru cocked his head in confusion.

Anri seemed to debate saying something, then just shook her head and sighed.

Anri opened the door and they stepped inside. The playroom looked like it could belong to any small boy. There were stuffed animals and toys everywhere.

Someone sat in the corner holding a tiny rag doll.

Subaru stared. *This can't be right! That guy's my age! Hell, he's several years older!*

Subaru and Emilia looked at each other in shock.

Gael was a tall, well built young man of about twenty. He had blond hair and an earnest open face. The first thing that one would notice about him was his blue eyes. They were bright, too bright.

"Hello, Gael," Anri said in a soothing voice. She knelt down next to him. "I've really missed you. Have you been OK?"

Gael didn't look at her, his attention was completely focused on the small rag doll that he cradled in his arms. "I've been fine," Gael said calmly, lifting his doll up in the air with a big smile. "It was a rough trip but I was OK. I had Anri!"

Anri's smile became strained. "That's right, Gael" She whispered. "You always have... her."

"We're home again, Anri," He crooned to the doll, cuddling it. "We'll be OK now. I'll always take care of you."

Anri sighed sadly. "I'm sorry that you had to be taken out of here. I'm sure that was really scary for you. I'm really sorry that I couldn't be there to take care of you..."

"Oh that's alright. We had a tea party!" Gael replied.

"Hello, Gael," Emilia said slowly. "It's very nice to meet you."

Gael made no sign that he had heard her. "Anri," Gael asked the doll conscientiously, "Do you want some more tea?" He appeared to listen to the doll carefully then nodded his head. He got up and walked to a tiny table that was made for children and sat down there. He looked ridiculous, sitting in the tiny chair. He proceeded to dip a tea spoon into an empty cup and then fed the doll sips of tea.

Emilia stood there awkwardly.

"Please don't take it personally," Anri whispered to her. "Gael doesn't interact with other people. He barely interacts with me and even then... he doesn't really know who I am."

Subaru's face twisted in sympathy. "He's sick?" He asked gently.

Anri nodded. "He developed this... 'brain fever' a few years after our parents died. I've been trying to look after him ever since I was ten. That's why I was so worried about how he was doing. I'm the only one who can make him take his medicine or make sure that he eats. He... never acknowledges me directly, or anyone else for that matter, but... sometimes he does what I ask him to."

"I'm so sorry," Emilia whispered.

Anri sighed. "Don't judge him by the way he is now. When I was younger, he was a wonderful person. A hero to the entire kingdom, extremely heroic and kind. I really looked up to him. In some ways, Julius reminds me of him."

"Was he a knight?" Subaru asked.

"Oh, yeah!" Anri nodded. "He was ranked first among all the Acolyte Knights before he even turned fourteen!" Anri said proudly. "That was why I started studying medicine, actually. I thought that by learning healing techniques, I could be useful to my brother and his friends on their adventures. I was desperate to go along with him. Then... a year or two after he was promoted to First among the Knights, he got sick..."

Subaru didn't know what to say. "That's... awful..." Subaru said helplessly.

"Hey..." Gael said slowly.

Subaru blinked as he realized that Gael was staring directly at him with a puzzled expression. "I know you. Aren't you Betty's Subaru?"

Subaru's jaw dropped. Anri was staring at Gael in shock.

Gael giggled, a high pitched sound at odds with his strong and well-built appearance. "You are! You're Betty's Subaru! And Puck's too!"

"How... do you know Beatrice?" Subaru gasped.

"Everybody knows Betty!" Gael replied dismissively. He hesitated. "Betty and Puck really miss you..."

Subaru's mouth worked but no sounds emerged. "Are they... safe?" Subaru asked, uncertain if Gael could even know the answer.

"They're fine," Gael said immediately. "They're about to take a little trip."

Subaru frowned. "A trip where?"

"They're going over there!" Gael said, pointing with confidence out a window. He looked up at Subaru expectantly.

Subaru sighed. "Thanks, Gael. That was... that was really useful..."

Gael beamed.

"Gael talked to you!" Anri gasped.

"Anri, how does he know about Beatrice?" Subaru demanded.

Anri shook her head. "Gael has... strange powers. But he's never been wrong about these sort of things. If he says that your spirits are safe then I'd bet my crown on them being fine." Anri shook her head. "I can't believe that he spoke to you..." She said in disbelief. "He's *never* spoken to anyone but me..."

Subaru hesitated looking at Anri's awestruck expression. He tried to think of some way to keep the conversation going. "Gael, what about... Felt?" He asked reluctantly.

"I think she's OK," Gael said without much interest. "I can't see her very well. She's quite dim."

Subaru made a face. "Actually she's amazingly clever. Frankly, I think your sister and Felt would get along great if they ever met."

Gael frowned. "Anri and Felt would be friends?"

"Sure!" Subaru shrugged.

"That's not what Gael means," Anri interjected quietly. "He uses the term 'dim' to describe people who he's not very... aware of. They're dim because they're hard for him to see. I never really understood how this worked and he naturally can't explain it now."

Subaru looked puzzled. "Felt's... dim?" He asked Gael.

Gael nodded. "Her boyfriend is as bright as the sun though. Almost like you," Gael added, looking at Subaru.

Subaru wasn't sure what to say.

Anri, Emilia, and Subaru looked at one another and Gael returned to snuggling with his doll.

Finally, Anri sighed. "Well, let's go talk to Uncle Radu. A lot has happened that he'll need to know about."

Subaru and Emilia nodded and left the room, with many backwards glances at Gael.

Anri lingered for several moments, watching Gael cradle and comfort his 'sister.'

"Anri," Radu whispered. "I don't know what to say!"

Upon returning to Anri's apartments, Radu had been there already, nursing a bottle of strong liquor. "I don't need food," Radu had said. "I need something to help dissolve all of the field rations I've been eating over the past few weeks! They're clogging up my belly and they won't move!"

Radu had listened to Anri's story with baited breath. Occasionally he asked a question but for the most part he just seemed shocked.

"Anri, your parents would be so proud of you," He whispered.

Anri bowed her head with a rueful smile.

Radu chuckled. "It won't be long before I'm bowing down to *you*!" He nudged her.

"Come on, Uncle. I won't be crowned for years."

"Oh, much sooner than that," Radu replied in amusement.

"Huh?"

"I've been hearing from the nobles ever since you defeated the Sanshi army. They're been pressuring me to step down and let you take over," Radu said in a pleased voice.

Anri blinked. "I can't be crowned yet! I'm too young!"

Radu shrugged. "Actually, Anri, you can be crowned whenever you have the support of a majority of the nobles. Several of the heads of the minor Houses of Siros have been broadly hinting to me that they were prepared to back your claim to the throne immediately. They urged me, respectfully of course, to get the hell out of your way. For reasons of my health," He finished, sounding amused.

"They *threatened* you?!" Anri asked incredulously.

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to call them threats," Radu chuckled. "They were very polite, after all. They just encouraged me to find other employment. *Quickly*."

Subaru burst out laughing at the shocked look on Anri's face.

Emilia elbowed him.

Subaru cleared his throat. "No, I understand how they feel," Subaru said. "You deserve it, Anri. Really. You're done amazing things. The nobles are right to want you to lead them."

Anri bowed her head. "Come on, Subaru, what have *I* done?" She sighed. "All I feel like I've accomplished is to stand back and watch you guys do everything."

"So?" Emilia asked intently.

Anri stared at her. "Emilia, if the nobles want me to be the ruler only because of everything that *you* did, then in what way am I-"

"Anri, you need to stop thinking that you only deserve credit for the things that you did without the help of anyone else," Emilia said firmly. "Stop thinking that you don't deserve credit for what others helped you to accomplish. That attitude will only make you miserable and your doubts will eventually consume you. Yes, we helped you to win your war but we did that because *you* convinced us to. You made us *want* to help you see your goals realized. Those are the traits of a leader. Nobody can do it all on their own. A real leader knows how to convince everyone to work together for a common cause. That's what you did, Anri, and that's why these nobles want you to lead them."

Anri stared at Emilia in disbelief.

Subaru wrapped an arm around Emilia's shoulder. "That's my fiancée," He bragged.

Emilia blushed.

Anri didn't appear to know what to say. "Anything... else that we should talk about?" Anri asked, desperate to change the subject.

Radu made a face. "Well, there is one piece of unpleasantness that we should discuss," He said slowly.

"What's that?"

Radu sighed. "Anri, you realize that you brought foreigners into Gusteko affairs when you recruited Subaru and his elf-"

"Emilia!" Subaru grated.

Radu flinched. "And now the other great Houses are likely to be livid about it," He finished apologetically.

Anri looked outraged. "Uncle! What else should I have done?! Are you telling me to denounce them after everything they've done for us?!"

Radu held up his hands. "Wait! I didn't say anything like that!" He said quickly.

Anri glared at him.

Radu took a deep breath. "Anri, you're going to be the ruler very soon. You need to start thinking like one. I'm not saying that you making an alliance with Subaru and... Emilia was a bad idea. I think that they're extremely valuable assets as well as loyal friends to you and loyal friends are worth cultivating on their own merits!"

"So what *are* you saying?" Anri asked, still not mollified.

Radu sigh, "Every asset you ever gather will have two edges. You need to be prepared for both the benefits and the pitfalls. A leader needs to minimize those pitfalls and that means she has to see them coming," He said in a placating voice.

Anri frowned. "What pitfalls, Uncle? I *don't* see them."

Radu sighed. "Gusteko is mostly a reactionary, xenophobic country. Foreigners have never been welcome here, especially demi-humans, even if Siros is somewhat an exception. You broke House Griest's back today and sudden power plays make the other Great Houses and the Hierocracy nervous. You made an alliance with Subaru Natsuki, someone whom many in Gusteko view as a killer and a monster. They might move against us."

"If I told the other Houses that Lagunica also now views me as a killer and a monster," Subaru muttered to Emilia. "Do you think they'd decide to change their minds just to be contrary?"

Emilia poked him in the side.

Subaru shrugged. "Just a thought," He murmured.

Anri thought about it then shook her head. "Uncle, I'll admit that this is all *possible* but I think it's most unlikely. What will the other Houses do? Griest was by far the strongest House and we pushed them back. What other House will step up to fill their shoes? Are you worried about a consortium of Houses all geared to oppose us? I don't think that's even *remotely* likely. If Malcolm an Griest was free then I could believe that he'd rally the other Houses to the cause but I don't see Deann doing that and certainly not Canmore. Deann is more likely to immediately try to negotiate her father's freedom, probably offering reparations and a peace treaty in exchange."

Radu nodded. "I agree that's the most likely outcome but keep all the possibilities in mind, Anri. Remember, a leader's primary job is to think of all the bad things that can happen and then to make sure that they don't."

Anri thought that through and nodded.

"The bigger problem deals with the destruction of the army," Radu added.

Subaru moaned and rubbed his face. Emilia took his hand and squeezed it tight.

"It was a very dark business, Uncle, but I can't say that I feel all that sorry for them," Anri sniffed.

"Nor do I," Radu agreed. "But the other Houses had lent forces to House Griest to threaten Lagunica. That... complicates things."

"Uncle, Julius mentioned that but I still don't understand it," Anri said. "Why were the Great Houses looking to pick a fight with Lagunica?"

"Well, I wasn't invited to the meeting personally," Radu said archly. "Malcolm an Griest doesn't trust me for some reason. All I know is what your Grandfather's Shadows were able to dig up."

Anri nodded.

Radu sighed. "Apparently, the other Houses decided that Siros had made an alliance with Lagunica and that Lagunica was determined to intervene in Gusteko internal politics."

"What?!" Anri asked in disbelief.

"After you and Master Subaru attacked the camp at Trolleheim," Radu explained. "The other Houses took it as undeniable evidence of Lagunican forming an alliance with Siros. They decided to join forces to march an army down to the border, make a lot of noise, and then politely ask Lagunica to mind its own business."

Subaru snorted. "I might have saved them an awful lot of trouble. Julius assured us that Lagunica was certain that Gusteko intended to attack. This could have spiraled out of control pretty damn fast!"

Radu nodded. "True, and I'm beyond grateful that you rescued my niece, but the other Houses are likely to be incensed. You wiped out nearly half of Griest's standing army and the other houses suffered heavy losses from the forces that they offered as well. They're going to be pretty angry..."

Anri looked unsettled.

Radu sighed. "Well, I'm about ready to hit the hay. I'm an old man and I need my sleep. Especially after a long campaign. Feel free to start planning your coronation tonight, Anri. Maybe after you're crowned, I'll get to sleep in once in a while."

"Uncle," Anri said fondly, rolling her eyes at him.

"Are you going to stay up?" Radu asked.

Anri shook her head. "I'm ready for bed too but I want to talk to Emilia and Subaru before I do."

Subaru, Emilia, and Anri gathered in the room that Anri had gifted them.

They sat in comfortable chairs surrounding a bright lamp on a small table.

Anri's fingers flexed as she sat there biting her lip.

Subaru and Emilia shared a worried glance.

"Anri," Subaru murmured. "Is something wrong?"

Anri took a deep breath. "It's time for me to confess my sins," She whispered. "I've been hiding something from you since the day that we met."

"Huh?" Subaru asked.

Emilia's eyes widened.

Anri sighed. She reached into her bag and pulled out a small black book.

Emilia's eyes widened. "Wait. That's the book that I took out of your satchel, Subaru! The one that I tore a page from to write the note!"

"My satchel?" Subaru said in surprise. "I had a book in my satchel?"

Anri bowed her head and handed it to Subaru.

Subaru took it with a confused frown. It was a plain black book without any markings on the cover.

Suddenly his eyes widened. "Wait a second! This is the book that I found on Petelguese's body! The one that Beatrice told me not to touch!"

"What?! Then why did you put it in your satchel?" Emilia asked in disbelief.

Subaru hesitated, fumbling for words. "I... I don't know. I just... kind of did. I forgot all about it!"

Anri bowed her head in shame. "Subaru, do you know what this is?"

"Um, ...no, not really," Subaru admitted.

Anri took a deep breath. "Subaru, this is a Witch's Gospel!" She whispered.

Subaru frowned. "Wait, those things that..." He trailed off.

Anri frowned. "What?" Anri asked.

"Nothing," Subaru replied.

Yeah. Let's not talk about all my 'buddies' in the Witch Cult right now.

Subaru shook his head. "Anri, what exactly are these things?"

Anri thought for a long moment. "Have you ever heard of 'Findláech of Moray?'"

"No," Subaru and Emilia said together.

Anri nodded. "The Witch's Gospels are famous in Gusteko. They're a very popular plot device in many fictional stories. The most famous of these stories is actually one of my favorites. It's an old play called 'Findláech of Moray.'"

Subaru sighed. "Fine, I'll bite. What's the play about?"

Anri sighed. "Findláech was the third son of the King of an imaginary kingdom. Findláech greatly resented the fact that he wouldn't inherit the throne. One day, while fleeing through a forest to escape mabeasts, he met a witch who offered to change his destiny. She claimed it was just a kindness offered to somebody whose greatness had been ignored by the

world. So she gave him a Gospel."

Subaru squinted. "OK, so just to ask a dumb question, what do these Gospel things actually do?"

"They predict the future," Anri said quietly. "According to legend, they can manipulate fate and lead their owner to whatever future they desire."

Subaru's eyes widened. "Well, that's pretty impressive!"

Anri nodded slowly. "So Findláech thought as well," Anri agreed. "He began to use the book to see the evolving future. It told him secrets that he used to neutralize or disgrace his rivals and occasionally it told him how to kill them."

"Eventually, Findláech has murdered both of his brothers and his own father and become King. He next attempts to conquer an enemy kingdom to the north on the Gospel's advice. He gathers a great army to destroy his enemies. On the eve before battle, Findláech reads the last page of the Gospel and it says 'My good pawn has played its last move. Thus I sacrifice thee. You die anon.'"

"Damn," Subaru murmured.

"Findláech is furious at being tricked by the Gospel but they're committed to battle now and can't retreat. Findláech throws his Gospel away in a rage and goes into battle. He meets the enemy King on the battlefield who reveals that he too has a Witch's Gospel that directed him to attack Findláech. Findláech tries to tell him that they've both been tricked but the King doesn't believe him and Findláech no longer has his own Gospel to prove it. They fight and Findláech dies. Then a guard comes up to the King and tells him that Findláech's reinforcements are approaching. By the end of the battle, almost everyone on either side is dead."

"The witch has the closing soliloquy," Anri continued. "She comes to the battlefield to recover her Gospels and explain that she wanted both kingdoms destroyed and the Gospels were her tools to manipulate greedy and ambitious fools to do it. She mocks all the characters for being foolish enough to believe that they could wield her power as their own."

Subaru looked baffled. "OK... What exactly is the moral of this story supposed to be? That Witchcraft is dangerous?" Subaru asked.

Anri hesitated. "There have been countless stories over the years, likely almost all made up, of mortals who somehow acquired a Witch's Gospel," Anri explained. "A few stories claim that the bearer achieved great wealth and status but most are cautionary tales. According to legend, anyone may hold a Witch's Gospel but no mortal can actually *possess* one. Only a Witch can bend the Gospel to her will. Anyone else might be permitted to read the Gospel but it will still do the work of its true master and guide them toward whatever future *she* most desires."

Subaru and Emilia shared a long worried look.

Emilia shook her head. "Anri," Emilia said in disbelief. "You... *stole* this out of Subaru's satchel?!"

Anri jumped. "No! I didn't steal it! It was given to me! I hadn't even met you yet. At first, I didn't even know that it was yours!"

Subaru and Emilia looked at each other for a long time. "Then who gave it to you?" Subaru asked.

Anri sighed. "Well, I'm not really sure."

"Anri," Subaru sighed.

"The day that we all met," Anri began. "I was in hiding in the woods with my bodyguards, not far from the Eilior Forest. There were only a few of us left. Victoire and a group of other Shadows had separated from us, trying to divide our foes. Elsa was hunting us as was another monster, a freakish, twisted little man with razor sharp teeth. We'd managed to lose them but we knew that they'd find us again quickly. My guards were all resting. Because they'd worked so hard that day to keep me safe, I was keeping watch. It was almost sunup."

"Suddenly, I noticed someone was standing out in the trees just beyond the firelight. The figure walked closer and I desperately tried to wake up Marcus and Hunnicutt but they slept as if they were dead. When the stranger entered the firelight, I knew that they weren't human. They were... unnatural. They wore a black hooded robe that seemed as if it had been spun out of shadows. No matter how close they got to the firelight, I couldn't see what they looked like under their hood. In fact, it seemed like they brought the darkness with them as they walked into the camp. The closer they came, the dimmer the firelight became."

"The figure saw me shaking my guards and she said, 'You won't be able to wake them like that.' I asked who she was. She said, 'Someone who wishes to see one who is doomed. Someone who pities fate's fool. Someone who can see your future and offer you a better destiny.'"

Subaru looked puzzled.

"She told me, 'You will die before the sunrises and with that, your ancient line will crumble into dust.' I told her that I wasn't dead yet."

Subaru raised an eyebrow. "Well, she sure talks funny. Do you really remember what she said word for word?"

"They're quotes, Subaru," Anri replied. "I remember them because they're all direct quotes from the witch in 'Findláech of Moray.'"

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Of course they are," Subaru shook his head in disbelief.

"She took this book out of a... a pocket, I guess," Anri continued. "She said, 'I offer you this, a key to your own best destiny.'"

Anri looked pained. "Um... Then I asked her if she could please stop pretending that we were on stage. She seemed to find that funny," Anri recalled.

Emilia shook her head sadly. "Anri, did you really talk back to a witch?" She sighed.

Anri flushed. "Well, I'd had a *very* long day..."

Emilia looked at Subaru accusingly. "I blame *you*, Subaru. Anri is mouthing off to witches because of your bad influence," She said, only half serious.

"Mili, don't you start," Subaru sighed. "There are no more witches, they're all dead except for Envy and she's been sealed away. The sooner everyone gets that through their heads, the sooner that they'll leave you alone."

"If she wasn't a witch then what do you think she was?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged. "I don't know. It might have been a Sin Archbishop. Or maybe just some lady who knows a few eerie magic tricks. We know that the witches are all gone though so let's dismiss that possibility from mind."

"Anyway," Anri said, "I didn't take the book. I told her that I knew what play she was quoting and the whole moral of the play was not to mess around with witchcraft. She chuckled and asked if I was sure that was the moral of the story. She told me that if I didn't accept her help, I and everyone in my party would never see the sunrise. She could help me survive and protect my people if... I accepted the Gospel."

"So you took it?" Subaru asked.

Anri nodded. "I... I had to try to keep my people safe. No matter the cost," She said in a small voice.

Anri sighed. "She gave me the Gospel and told me that the Gospel could guide me to my own best destiny. I tried to read it but it burned my eyes. The Witch laughed and told me that only one proffered by a Witch could read a Gospel. She laid her hand on the Book and murmured something. After that, I could read it. Then she walked away. I read the Gospel. It told me that my House was doomed unless I could find 'the man from beyond the Great Waterfall.'"

Subaru sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Alright. What happened next?"

"The Gospel told me how to save my party. It told me how to lead the group away from the traps that Elsa had created. We were OK for a few hours. However, the Gospel warned me not to cross the river so I told my guards not to but they overruled me. They thought it would be the best way to get our pursuers off our trail. We crossed the river and blundered directly into an ambush. Elsa cut down my guards left and right. Hunnicutt managed to get me out of there. The Gospel told me to flee into the forest so we did since Hunnicutt had no better ideas. Elsa pursued us but we blundered into a group of mabeasts. Elsa was attacked by a huge pack of mabeasts and that let us get away. Unfortunately, the mabeasts also came after us. That was where you found me, Emilia."

Subaru gave Anri a hard look. "What about the note?"

Anri blinked. "What note?"

"The note that was left behind in the cottage the day we met?" Emilia snapped.

Anri shook her head. "I had nothing to do with that. The first time I came to the cottage was with you, Emilia. I swear."

Emilia's eyes were like flint.

"Alright, so what happened next?" Subaru grumbled.

Anri sighed. "Emilia saved me from the mabeasts but I'd lost the Gospel with my other things when I fell out of the tree. I wasn't sure what to do next and the Gospel was my only asset to try to save my people! I had to get it back. So I tried to persuade you to let me grab it before we left the forest. I knew that I needed to get home but I had no idea how I could get there without running into Elsa again so I just guessed that I should head to Rixum. When I got the Gospel back, it told me to go to Iruk instead and told me that the ingredients to make the 'Draught of Unquenchable Flame' were there. I had no idea *why* it told me that, it's a pretty obscure recipe after all, but after Subaru was injured by the Black Water, it turned out to be vital information.

"We went to Iruk and I made the medicine. It was right around then that Emilia told me that you were from beyond the Great Waterfall. I was sure that you were the man that the Gospel had told me to look for-"

"I doubt that there's too many of us," Subaru mused.

Anri sighed. "Then Elsa showed up and Emilia fought her off."

Anri looked at Emilia in appeal but she looked back doubtfully.

Anri bowed her head. "Emilia was badly wounded. I checked the Gospel and it told me that if we went to the army camp we could find medicine. I wasn't sure how this was going to work," She admitted. "But the Gospel hadn't steered me wrong yet so off we went. We cured Emilia and I started asking you to help me save my people.

"When we returned to the forest, I checked the Gospel and it warned me about the invaders and that they would flood the forest if Subaru didn't stop them. So I lied and told you that I'd seen the tracks and sent you after them."

Subaru glowered at Anri.

Anri sighed. "We left the forest again and we met up with Victoire. After we arrived, the safe-house was ruined and Vera was dead. I was at a loss. I checked the Gospel and it told me to go to Ganaks and find 'the Paladin,'" Anri hung her head in shame. "But I couldn't talk you guys into bringing me with you into the city. You left Emilia and I behind and then later Emilia did the same. We'd failed to follow the Gospel's script and I wasn't sure what to do next. The Gospel told me that I had to choose whether to save myself or the Paladin. I wasn't sure what that meant at the time but now I think that I had probably made my choice when I rescued Julius from his betrayers.

"I checked the Gospel tonight and it told me that it belongs to you and that I should give it back to you," Anri finished quietly. "So... I did."

Subaru and Emilia exchanged a grim look. "Anything else?" Emilia asked in a hard tone.

Anri shook her head. "You know all the rest. I don't want there to be any secrets between us from now on," She said fervently.

The room was quiet for a long moment. Emilia was scowling at Anri.

Subaru sighed. "Anri, why all the secrecy? Why didn't you just tell us?" Subaru asked in a soft voice.

"Tell you what? That I was holding a Witch's Gospel?" Anri asked incredulously. "How would you have reacted to that?!"

Oh, don't worry. Lots of the folks I've dealt with lately have one. It's bordering on trendy these days.

Emilia glared at Anri. "I trusted you!" She whispered. "And you've been lying to us from the beginning!"

Anri bit her lip. "I didn't *lie*, Emilia," Anri protested in a weak voice. "I just... didn't tell you everything..."

Emilia shook her head. "I don't want to hear it, Anri! A lie of omission is still a lie!"

Anri hung her head in guilt.

Subaru sighed and took Emilia's hand. "Look, it's been a very long day for all of us. We all need a good night's sleep. Let's just... figure this whole thing out in the morning."

Anri nodded and went to leave the room. She opened the door and then hesitated, looking back at them. "Are you... planning to use the Gospel?"

Emilia and Subaru looked at each other. "I don't know," Subaru said honestly.

Anri sighed. "I would have died if I hadn't used it. The Gospel is powerful. But..." She trailed off.

Subaru waited a moment. "But?" He prompted.

Anri bit her lip. "Did I ever tell you what my favorite dramatic scene is?" She asked.

Subaru actually chuckled. "No. I don't think that *ever* came up," Subaru said with a smile.

"It's from Findláech. Findláech first meets the witch accompanied by a dear friend, a wise companion named Lochamber who expresses his doubt of the witch's intentions and he urges Findláech to cast the Gospel away. He says 'I will give you one final piece of advice, dear friend. This book has a will of its own. Do not trust the lies that it spins. If you truly feel that you must, then take from the Gospel what you need but never forget that the dark presence within its pages is *not* your ally.'"

Subaru just stared at her.

Anri left the room without another word, pausing only to give them a last lingering look before shutting the door behind her.

Late that evening, Donar, Patrick, Vlad, and Argus gathered in Pardochel.

"Are we expecting anyone from House Griest to attend?" Donar asked.

Patrick shrugged helplessly. "I expect that they're pretty busy right now. They've lost more than half of their armed forces in the disaster today and their realm is exhausted from the war regardless. Not to mention Malcolm himself was captured."

"I simply can't believe it," Argus muttered. "How did this happen?"

"Only a handful of my men returned from the disaster at the Valley of Winds," Patrick replied, nervously biting a nail. "Most were badly burned and some may not survive. They said that the army was destroyed singlehandedly by Subaru Natsuki."

"The Butcher of Arlem," Vlad hissed.

"Butcher doesn't do him justice," Patrick mourned. "The few survivors who returned to my forces after the disaster are well known to me. These are strong and stouthearted men but even they were quivering with fear to remember living through that fiery hell. They shudder whenever Subaru Natsuki's name is mentioned. My people have taken to calling him 'the Fire Witch.'"

"Fire Witch?" Argus muttered.

Patrick nodded. "My soldiers reported that Subaru set the entire valley ablaze with a wave of his hand and thousands of men burned alive in seconds! I've also heard rumors that Subaru Natsuki nearly burned down the city of Ganaks but that they managed to contain the fire after he fled," Patrick replied. He shook his head. "My astrologer warned me of sudden blazes and great heats. I should have seen this coming."

The other princes groaned.

Donar frowned in thought. "My soldiers told me that the blaze was started by *fire arrows*."

"Be sensible, Donar!" Argus scoffed. "Fire may spread fast in dry grass but nothing like this! This *had* to be witchcraft. No normal means or magic could cause devastation on this scale."

"I don't understand," Donar murmured. "Why would Subaru Natsuki do this? Why would he bear us such malice?"

"Does a witch need a reason?" Vlad grumbled.

The other princes ignored Vlad. Where they had lost about half their armies, Vlad had lost nearly all of his. He wouldn't maintain control of his own province for much longer. He might even fall to being considered a lesser House before the seasons turned.

"Perhaps he did have a reason," Patrick said in a grim voice. "Remember, Subaru Natsuki was the heavy favorite to be King of Lagunica. Apparently they're electing a King and that means that the candidates need to do something truly impressive. That puts certain ideas in my head. After all what's the best way to impress the nobility with your power and achievements?"

"I don't know, what?" Argus asked.

Patrick looked at the men in disbelief. "Does the term 'conquest' ring a bell? As in, 'the Lagunican conquest of Gusteko?'"

Argus and Donar stared at Patrick in horror.

Patrick rolled his eyes. "Please! None of us are children! I can't be the only one thinking this! In one move, Subaru Natsuki has crippled the armed forces of most of Gusteko! Conquering the north wouldn't be easy but it would be entirely feasible, especially with that quisling Kairei providing the southerners with a safe staging area to operate from!"

"The Lagunicans don't have the balls to come up here and start trouble!" Vlad snapped. "They know what's waiting for them up in Gusteko lands!"

Patrick gave Vlad an annoyed look, then dismissed him from thought and continued. "If I were Lagunica, I'd be ready to move into southern Gusteko in force. House Griest is too exhausted to fight back and House Ithil must have already made a deal with them so it would be safe territory to occupy and operate from."

"Our Houses may have been weakened, Patrick," Donar said slowly. "But Lagunica can't expect us to roll over that easily. Our Houses are still strong."

Patrick shook his head. "For generations, we've all depended on House Griest's army to defend us. They were the ones with the largest armies. What's worse, Lagunica may not be interested in conquering our Houses. If it can take just the southern provinces and maybe one or two more, then it could have enough of a majority to try and put the candidates of its choice on the Holy Throne. Has anyone else been wondering why assassins were hunting down our children and grandchildren for the past few months?" Patrick said in a deathly voice. "The only two candidates left with any serious chance for the Holy throne are Kairei an Ithil and Canmore an Griest. Two individuals who are either now or soon will be under Lagunica's thumb!"

The Princes stared at each other in horror.

Donar covered his face. "Oh, this plan has been well laid. All is lost!"

"That's enough of that, Donar!" Argus poked him hard. "You're one of the few men in this world that has my respect. Don't throw that away now!"

Donar took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes. I needed that. Thank you, Argus."

"Right," Argus grumbled. "So the question is, what are we going to do about all this?"

"We must face reality, gentlemen. We lack the strength to oppose the dragon kingdom," Donar murmured. "Perhaps we should consider a negotiated settlement?"

"We're not that desperate yet!" Argus scoffed.

Donar looked at him incredulously. "We're not?!"

"We should hold off on submitting to Lagunica. Or Siros for that matter," Patrick grumbled. He thought for a moment. "Perhaps we can make a campaign in the north more unattractive."

"How would we do that?" Argus asked.

"What if something happened to Kairei?" Patrick mused. "If House Ithil was dissolved, Lagunica would lose its ally and its beachhead in the northern wars. It might be enough to make them rethink the wisdom of a campaign."

"How would we arrange that?" Donar asked. "It's dishonorable in the extreme to deliberately attempt to eradicate another House."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, old man," Vlad muttered.

"She's a quisling! There's only one appropriate fate for traitors!" Argus snapped. "Personally, I'm less worried about justifying her death than I am in pulling it off! House Ithil may be exhausted by the wars but it still stands strong. It might still be too much for the three of us to tear down without destroying ourselves in the process!"

"Four of us!" Vlad shouted.

The others ignored him.

"Besides," Argus continued. "She apparently has a pair of witches guarding her! If we attack Siros, who knows what kind of spellcraft they'd throw against our people!"

"Maybe that's the answer," Donar mused. "The people of Siros can't be happy that the Princess is harboring witches."

"As I understand it, they aren't," Patrick replied. "But as of right now, Kairei is the hero of the age in Siros. She ended the war and captured Prince Malcolm so the populace expects a very favorable treaty to be signed. If anyone in Siros doesn't love their princess, they're being very careful to keep it to themselves."

"The Hierocracy might get involved," Donar mused. "They'd be livid about witches in Gusteko."

"If House Ithil was stripped from the rolls of the Houses again, what of it?" Argus scoffed. "They survived two hundred years like that! They've only been back on the rolls for about a decade. It won't cause any significant disruption in their lives, especially with Lagunica now supporting them more than Gusteko ever has!"

Patrick shook his head. "We need to hold a summit immediately. We must understand Ithil's intentions and clarify that they will not be permitted to completely upend the balance of power among the Houses. We also need to contact Lagunica and find out what they're planning."

"For some reason, I doubt that they'll just tell you what they're planning, Patrick," Argus said dryly.

Patrick shook his head. "I have contacts in Lagunica. There are several powerful nobles who owe me numerous favors. I can find out what the Sages' Council is up to. Just give me a few days."

Subaru and Emilia were both ready for bed but a shower sounded wonderful.

Emilia went first and she had a beatific smile on her face after she emerged from the bathroom, wearing in a fluffy white robe. Not long after, Subaru exited the shower feeling almost as if he'd been born again.

Man, how long has it been since I got clean? And I'm not talking about 'that time Emilia and I spent in that pond' kind of clean.

My last shower, if you can even call what they offer in the army camp a shower, was right before we killed the whale.

Subaru found a similar fluffy white robe in the bathroom and put it on before exiting. He found Emilia sitting on the bed with a dreamy expression on her face.

Subaru looked around the room with a frown. "Mili, where are our clothes?"

"Oh, a maid came and asked if she could clean them for us so I gave her yours too. She said she'd have them back to us first thing in the morning."

"Let's hope so or we're not going very far," Subaru murmured, sitting down beside Emilia.

Emilia looked momentarily downcast. "Subaru, I'm still pretty angry with Anri. I don't like secrets. How do we know that we can really trust her?"

Subaru sighed. "Let's... not borrow trouble right now, Mili. We have enough problems on our plate as it is."

Emilia nodded slowly. "What are we going to do with that Book?"

Subaru thought a moment and then shrugged. "I guess we'll try to read it?"

"It might be dangerous," Emilia warned.

Subaru rocked his head back and forth. "I mean, it didn't hurt Anri, right?"

Emilia nodded reluctantly.

Subaru grabbed the book off the night table and opened it.

He turned to the first page. Emilia glanced at it and immediately jerked her head away, shutting her eyes tight.

"Emilia?" Subaru asked in alarm.

"I remember now," She murmured. "I tried to read the book when I was looking through your satchel to find paper for a note. It burned my eyes but at least it had blank pages for me to use."

Subaru stared at the seemingly ordinary paper, puzzled. "What do you mean 'it burned your eyes?'"

"The letters were hard to look at. It felt like I had double vision or the letters kept changing shape," Emilia explained with her eyes still shut.

Subaru stared at the book and then shook his head. "I don't know what to tell you, Mili. It's not doing anything like that."

Emilia peeked at the book through one eye and quickly shut it again. "It is to me!" She said helplessly.

Subaru nodded. "Maybe this is something to do with me having an Authority and you don't," Subaru suggested. He quickly scanned the Book. "Huh. I wonder if Anri sees something different than I do. I don't see anything about her in here at all. Anyway, I'll read it to you," He said, turning the book so the cover faced Emilia.

She slowly opened her eyes.

Subaru cleared his throat. "*Only a fool throws away knowledge of his enemy.*"

Subaru froze. "I remember now. That was the only line in this book when I picked it up. I read that line by accident and I thought it made sense so I put the book in my satchel. Then I... forgot all about it."

"Subaru, do you think that the Gospel might have *made* you forget about it?" Emilia worried.

Subaru frowned and thought about it. "I don't know. I mean... maybe," He admitted. "But I found the Gospel on the day that I first came to the Sanctuary and things got so crazy after we arrived that maybe I forgot about it all on my own. Besides, wouldn't an evil, magical talisman *want* me to remember it? It seems like it would make more sense if it tried to manipulate me to use it a lot rather than forget all about it."

Emilia sighed and shook her head. "Just keep reading, Subaru," She murmured. "Let's get this over with."

"OK," Subaru said. He read the next line. "*The Harlequin plays his own game. He does not play with you, he simply advances a pawn. The Frost Queen stares through a mirror darkly. She will never pass the first trial until she illuminates the lies that she tells only to herself.*"

Subaru put the book down with a sigh. "You know, as far as prophecies go, these really suck. I barely understand what they mean and they're talking about the goddamn past! What good is a prophecy that you can't understand in advance?!"

"I don't know, Subaru. Let's just finish reading the book. Is there much more?"

"No, I don't think so," Subaru replied. "*The hunters follow the miasma. Great power breeds great fear. Be careful how you reveal your power lest you be betrayed by those you trust.*"

Subaru sighed. "This is all clear as mud," He complained. "I mean, I understand what it's trying to say but I *only* understand it because we already did it!"

"Anything else?" She murmured.

"*You walk in the protective shelter of the Witch's shadowy garment. Many eyes seek you but all the witches are blind. They listen for the song but only two witches can hear you. You carry three instruments: the Litany, the keepsake, and the heart of the spirits. Each pursuer hears two but they all sing the same melody.*"

Subaru put down the Gospel. "Mili, I thought the witches were all dead! Why is everybody talking about witches all of a sudden?"

Emilia just shrugged.

Subaru sighed and kept reading. "*A normal man's destiny flows like a river but who can predict the path of a drop of water in a wide, open sea. Even the Gospel struggles to perceive the web of destiny beneath the Witch's protective shadow.*" No idea what that means. "*Even a True King is not a bottomless well. Take on too many burdens and all will suffer for it.*" Subaru closed his eyes with a sigh. "Let's just... move on. *The Quest for the Book begins with the Silk Merchant of Picoutatte.*"

Subaru paused. "*What* book?" He asked rhetorically.

Emilia shrugged.

Subaru sighed. "Really helpful. Although, I have to give the Gospel credit. At least that one was *short*. This looks like the

last line in the Gospel. *'The Mother of a Thousand Young strains to see through the keyhole. The Black Goat of the Wood has many eyes but they all turn red when she contemplates the King of Pride.'*"

Subaru closed the book. "Well, that was a huge waste of time. I don't know why Anri even thought that this was useful. It seems like for whatever reason, the Gospel was giving her much more specific instruction that it gave us."

Emilia just shook her head looking pensive. "Subaru, let's forget about any more witchcraft for the night. Are you ready for bed?"

Subaru nodded. "Oh, you better believe it. I'm not as tired as I was, thanks to our long nap in the wagon but a night in a real bed sounds wonderful!"

Subaru tucked the Gospel into his satchel and they quickly undressed and slipped under the covers.

Emilia made a contented sound. "We haven't been in a bed like this for a long time. It's so big and soft."

"It's too big!" Subaru said in mock irritation as he pulled her closer. "With all this room, how am I supposed to convince you to snuggle up with me?"

Emilia giggled. "I bet that you can think of a way."

Subaru kissed her.

"Subaru," Emilia said, her face growing serious. "What do you think about us... staying in Siros? I can't deny that I'm still very angry with Anri for lying to us but... I'm worried about what might happen to her if we abandon her."

Subaru frowned. "Well, we certainly won't be going anywhere for a while. Even if the Grand Archives does have the information we need, from what Anri has told me, the place is huge! It might take us weeks just to dig the information out!"

"Honestly, perhaps that's for the best. But what about after that?"

Subaru thought a moment. "We'll make certain that Anri is safe but if the cure we need is somewhere else, I'm not going to hang around here. We've been through hell, Mili. I'm not going to rest until we've reunited our family and they remember who you are."

"I know that, Subaru," Emilia said, snuggling up against him. "And I feel the same way. I mean, what will we do after we have our family back together?"

"Heal your people," Subaru said meaningfully. "I haven't forgotten, Mili. After that's done, we're free agents. We can do whatever we want. Whether that's live in the forest or come and stay with Anri. We can do whatever makes you happy."

Emilia sighed. "Subaru, what would make *you* happy?"

Subaru thought for a moment. "I just want our family back together and safe. That's all I want," Subaru said seriously. "Everything else is negotiable. We have a ton of problems and I just want to put them behind us."

Emilia's face was grave. "Subaru, I know that we have a lot of problems to deal with. But, just for tonight, do you think that you can help me forget about them?"

She gave him a deep, slow kiss.

Subaru and Emilia might have actually slept later the next morning but they were awoken by the maid returning their clothes.

In all fairness, she *was* trying to be quiet but Subaru and Emilia immediately snapped awake as soon as they heard the door open.

"Who's there?!" Subaru demanded of the frightened maid.

The maid wasn't sure what to do when two clearly naked people challenged her with harsh looks and raised fists. They both looked prepared for battle.

The maid threw her hands high over her head and stood trembling in place. "I was just bringing your clothes back, sir!" The maid squeaked.

After dealing with that minor embarrassment, Subaru and Emilia got dressed and went down to the banquet hall where they found Anri, Victoire, and Gael who was endeavoring to feed his doll.

Anri had changed out of her traveling clothes and was dressed in an elaborate green gown. It was somewhat low cut in front and the key rested on her breast like some strange amulet.

Anri perked up as soon as they entered the room. "Subaru, Emilia! Good morning!"

"Morning, Anri," Subaru and Emilia murmured sitting down across from her.

"How did you both sleep?" Anri asked anxiously.

Emilia closed her eyes. "Everything is fine, Anri. You can relax," She murmured in resignation.

Subaru grinned at her. "My Mili can't hold onto a grudge," Subaru told Anri with a chuckle.

Emilia poked Subaru in the side.

A maid brought Subaru and Emilia some scrambled eggs and glasses of juice.

"I'm afraid that it looks like I'm going to be rather busy today," Anri sighed. "Uncle Radu has arranged for me to start meeting with the noble houses and laying the foundations for my coronation."

"Congratulations," Subaru murmured.

Anri looked pained. "Any chance that you two would consider hiding me in the forest?" She asked plaintively. "Just for a decade or two?"

"Sorry, Anri. You've got to man up for this one," Subaru chuckled.

Anri rolled her eyes heavenward. "Someone needs to explain to me how I won the war and yet find myself in a worse position than I was before."

"Hey, Princess," Victoire murmured. "If you're really going to be dicking around with those noble cucks all day, then do you want me to drag these two over to the Grand Archives? I can help them start to tear the place up looking for their cure."

Anri thought about it and nodded. "That's actually a very good idea, Victoire. Would you mind helping them get started?"

She shrugged. "Nah. Unless you'd see fit to give me a vacation instead. I know this really swinging joint in Vollachia with nude dancers. I haven't been there in *way* too long."

Anri looked at Subaru and Emilia. "My grandfather will be your best asset to try and locate the cure but I don't expect him back until sometime this afternoon at the earliest."

Subaru shrugged. "Well, we can give it a try anyway."

Anri nodded. "I'll hold dinner for you. I'd like you to meet my Grandfather. He's a wonderful man and a Patriarch of the Holy Church."

Subaru nodded. "Sounds good."

Anri untied the large ornate key from around her neck. "Subaru Natsuki," Anri said formally. "By my right of succession and the sovereignty of my crown, I grant you unfettered access to the legacy of my people. Please guard them well as they are more precious than any treasure."

Subaru nodded gravely.

Victoire reached out her hand but blinked in surprise when Anri passed the key directly to Subaru.

Anri looked at her apologetically but Victoire waved it off.

Subaru took the key. "Thank you, Anri," He said seriously. "I will take good care of what you have entrusted to me and I vow that I see it returned to you safely."

Anri smiled. "I have no doubts."

"Take good care of them, Victoire," Anri urged her. "Also remember you can use my name now!"

"Yup, I'll be all over them..., Anri," Victoire said awkwardly. "I'll make those librarians earn their keep!"

Anri got up from the breakfast table and waved goodbye to Victoire, Subaru, and Emilia. "Goodbye! I'll see you all this evening!"

"Alright, so here are the fucking Archives," Victoire said, climbing out of the carriage that had stopped just outside of the city.

Subaru followed Victoire out of the carriage and gaped at the enormous building. "Holy shit! This thing looks like a fortress, not a library!"

The Archives was squat and square and had no windows. It was easily six stories high and was made of heavy flagstones and what looked like concrete.

Can they even make concrete here? Maybe they have something similar?

Huh. I wonder how you do make concrete. Maybe it's not as hard as I'm imagining.

"Well, no shit," Victoire said with a lofty smile. "This is my people's goddamn treasury! This is the repository of all knowledge that we've been entrusted with guarding for fucking centuries!"

Subaru squinted up at the towering building as Emilia followed him out of the carriage. "I guess you guys take the term 'guarding' very literally. If you hadn't told me, I'd assume this was a prison or the treasury instead of a library."

The empty carriage trundled away back to the palace.

"Hey, just for your information, I hope that you jokers both appreciate what a fucking honor that was," Victoire said, not unkindly as they walked up the stairs to the fortress-like Archives.

"What an honor *what* was?"

"Being given the Princess's fucking key!" Victoire snorted. "Only the royal family has access to the key. The royal family's Shadows are permitted to hold the key only on super frigging rare occasions. *Never* has an outsider been entrusted with holding it. You have been fucking honored. *Believe* me!"

Subaru nodded slowly. "I'll make sure to mention that to Anri next time I see her."

"The Princess... 'Anri,' Victoire corrected herself awkwardly, "Was seriously fucking lucky to have run into the two of you. Frankly, the thought of what might have happened without you two dopes watching out for her gives me the chills."

"I think that you're underestimating Anri's determination," Emilia replied. "She would have found a way to save her people, with or without us."

Victoire shook her head. "Last night, Anri told me all about your adventures. I couldn't fucking believe it. If anyone else had told me this story, I would have figured that they were bullshitting me! Singlehandedly slaying a Snow Blight *and* the Black Water? Defeating the Bowel Hunter and an entire regiment of Sanshi soldiers? Facing a Sin Archbishop and breaking out of a fortified city? Overcoming an entire motherfucking army of Sanshi soldiers? Every single one of those things would be impossible. All of them fucking together? That's a miracle. All I can say is that it was a frigging lucky day for the Princess and Siros in general when you two found her."

Subaru sighed. "It has been a long, difficult road, hadn't it, Mili? So many of the people that we thought were friends want us dead now."

"I know, Subaru. And it may get worse before it gets better," Emilia replied sadly.

"Don't worry," Subaru said, taking her hand. "As long as we're together-"

"We can do anything," Emilia finished.

Less than an hour later, Anri had a splitting headache. She'd been sitting in a comfortable chair in the parlor, dressed up like a decorative doll and mouthing vapid pleasantries with a variety of nobles while saying nothing of consequence. Not that there wasn't a huge number of important and time critical plans that needed to be discussed and solidified right away but the nobility didn't seem ready to go there yet. For whatever reason, the nobility appeared to feel that finishing this elaborate and meaningless song and dance of vapid pleasantries with Anri was very necessary.

Uncle Radu was in attendance but the nobles paid him no mind as his regency was now clearly in its twilight. Several times, Anri looked at Radu in mute appeal, begging for a rescue from this tedium.

Each time, Anri had seen Radu bite his cheek to avoid laughing and shake his head.

His eyes said: *Sorry, Anri. You're the ruler in all but name now. I've been dealing with this frustration ever since your mother died. Now it's your turn!*

Anri checked a sigh and started thinking about what sorts of tedious and unpleasant tasks she could assign her Uncle to pay him back for all this.

The discussion was going nowhere fast and it looked to be headed even deeper into irrelevancy when a tall, heavysset man walked into the parlor. He had a long gray beard and his face was very good natured.

Anri's face lit up. "Grandfather!" Anri sang, jumping out of her chair and flinging herself into his arms.

"Oh! My little Anri!" The old man crooned, holding her tight. "All grown up and already a hero! Your parents would be so proud of you!"

Anri took a deep breath and her eyes were watery as she slowly pulled away. "I got an awful lot of people killed, Grandfather."

He rubbed her shoulder. "Sometimes that too is a leader's job, little one," He said sympathetically.

Anri bowed her head.

"Ah!" Radu coughed, giving Anri cover to cry for a moment. "I trust my lords will excuse our princess for the time being. Family matters do precedence after all. If you gentlemen will accompany me, I'll be happy to discuss our strategies for resolving the southern front," Radu said cheerfully, shooing the men out of the parlor.

Radu looked back at Anri and flashed her a wink.

Anri smiled at him through watery eyes before turning her attention back to her grandfather.

Gustov shook his head in wonder. "Ah, Anri, you will be a great ruler of Siros. After a victory like this, Odglass and the Hierocracy might even take note! My granddaughter, Holy King!"

Anri blanched. "Don't say things like that, Grandfather! I'm already going to be overwhelmed just ruling Siros. Now you want to make me responsible for all of Gusteko?"

"Can you think of a more capable candidate?" Gustov asked simply.

Anri looked pained. "How about... literally *anyone* else?"

Gustov threw his head back and laughed. "Ah, my little one. Confidence will come to you in time. But enough worries for the future. How is Vera?"

Anri's eyes widened. "Vera?"

"Yes. Is she well?"

Anri bit her lip. She searched for the right words. Finally, she sighed. "I'm sorry, Grandfather but... Vera didn't make it. She died in Stoneybrooke. I'm sorry. I thought that you knew."

Gustov's face fell. "Oh no," The old man began to weep. "I'd hoped that she would take over for me when I'm no longer able to administer the Archives..."

"I know, Grandfather," Anri said, holding his hand.

"This war has been terrible. So many lives lost pointlessly! Too much killing in this world, too much death. Not enough respect for people, for tradition, for life. I don't know, I just-" Gustov cut himself off and looked down at his granddaughter in embarrassment.

Anri nodded, patting his hand.

Gustov gave her a sad smile. "Dreadful business. You've brought honor and glory to your House simply by surviving all of this," He sighed. Gustov stopped and thought for a moment. "Wait. If it wasn't Vera than what Shadow were you with?"

"Victoire, Grandfather," Anri explained. "The one that you sent to meet us in Pardochel and she's been helping us ever since. She was the only one in the party who survived. I'm planning to have her transferred to my own personal guard."

Gustov frowned at her.

Anri rolled her eyes at him. "Come on, Grandfather. Do you need her that badly? I'm entitled to a few guards.

"Anri," Gustov said intently. "I know the names of every single Shadow we have. Who is 'Victoire?'"

***Chapter 24*: Chapter 24**

Subaru and Emilia wandered through the Archives in awe. The building that had looked so big and imposing from outside, staggered the imagination from inside. The building was nothing but books. A six story building the size of a stadium with books covering every inch of the walls and lining countless bookshelves in between.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered. "We thought that searching the archives might take weeks. Now I'm worried that it might take years!"

"Yeah," Subaru agreed in awe. He looked at Victoire who wasn't bothering to hide her amusement at their shock. "Is there a system here for the books?"

Victorie smiled at him. "There sure is but good fucking luck figuring it out! I still need to ask the librarians if I want to find anything! Patriarch Gustov will be your best resource for finding the info. That old man is responsible for every fucking book in the Archives. No one knows them better. In the meantime, I'll go grab his assistant librarian. That bozo should be able to help you make a start."

"Great," Subaru said. "Hey, where do I use this?" Subaru asked, holding up the key Anri had given him.

"Over here," She said, leading them out of the vast main room and down a hallway. The hallway was full of doors. A few of these doors were open and Subaru saw that each room was also overflowing with bookshelves.

Of the doors that were closed, some of them had keys that had been left in the locks.

Subaru absently looked at one and realized it was very much like the one he held.

"What are these?" Emilia asked.

"These are the restricted sections. Of course, some are more restricted than others. They deal with information thought to be too dangerous or too valuable to be exposed to the public. The Princess's key is special, of course. It opens the inner library where we hold the books that date from the Old Kingdom and other priceless resources. That library is forbidden even to Shadows without explicit royal permission. Even I've never fucking been inside!"

Victoire led them to a huge ornate door at the end of the hall and waved Subaru forward.

Subaru took Anri's key and slid it into the lock, opening the door.

The library inside was small and sedate. Just another room full of bookshelves with no evidence of any earth shaking secrets inside.

Although the inner library was much smaller than the main library, it was still enormous.

Subaru looked around and sighed. "Victoire, any suggestions on where we should start?" Subaru asked.

Victoire made a face. "Like I said, I've never been in here either. I'll go fetch the Head Librarian. He'll be able to tell you where to start."

Victoire hesitated. "Also, Lord Subaru, since you've already used the key, would you mind if I locked it up in the safe until we leave. We're pretty sensitive about the key being lost."

Subaru nodded, pulling out a book at random and trying to read it without success. He didn't even recognize the alphabet.

He handed her the key. "If Anri asks, tell her that I made you swear that weird oath she said before I gave it to you."

Victoire nodded, studying the key. "I'll do that. Hang tight, I'll be back shortly."

Subaru nodded, picking up another book and flipping through it.

She walked back down the hall with the key.

Crusch was awake before dawn. She had received the document containing Felix's testimony about Subaru Natsuki late last night and now she brought it to the castle.

Finally. I have real evidence of Subaru Natsuki's perfidy!

Subaru Natsuki was seen having dinner with an Archbishop of Sin. They were recorded discussing Subaru's membership in the Witch Cult!

This will shake the hearts of even Subaru's most fanatical followers.

I admit that the evidence is weak. It's Felix telling us what a dead man told him that Subaru Natsuki said and did. But it is evidence nonetheless and at the very least, no man could possibly question Felix's integrity. If he claims that this 'Pierre' said these words, then these words were said. We have no way of judging Pierre's honesty but why would a dying man make such an accusation if it were untrue? What would there be to gain?

But what does all this mean? Prior to this, all evidence suggested that the Witch Cult was actively trying to kill Subaru Natsuki and his witch. Now they wish to recruit him?

Could Subaru have caused a schism within the Witch Cult? That might explain the attack at the castle the other night. No one near the blast was taken alive to question or provide a report but a distant observer claimed that the ostensible Witch Cultists began to attack each other.

Rumors claim that the Witch Cult is strongly divided between those who worship the Witch of Envy and those that hate and fear her. Now that the witch is free and wandering the world in Subaru Natsuki's company, perhaps Subaru is inflaming that division?

The weaker faction of the Witch Cult that openly serves the Witch might have been empowered by Subaru Natsuki finally liberating her. What order of fanatics would not surge in power and conviction if their goddess was openly resurrected?

Were the Archbishops that Subaru Natsuki killed part of the faction that worships the witch or the faction that hates her? I'd suspect the later but maybe the leaders of the pious side of the Cult were feuding with the man who would threaten their authority. I could argue the evidence either way with ease which is of no help in solving a riddle.

I must simply wait for now. As Father would have said: Truth will out. I must have faith in that.

Moreover, I have greater matters to attend to. The capitol was attacked by radicals the other night who blew an enormous hole in the land right outside the castle and now Gusteko plans to attack northern Lagunica. I must accept full responsibility for that blunder. I was so busy trying to prevent Vollachia from taking advantage of the chaos of the past few weeks that I completely ignored the threat from the north!

She entered the council chamber but to her surprise, the entire sages' council and royal assembly were present.

McMahon looked surprised to see her. "Lady Crusch?"

Crusch was thrown off step for a moment by the huge crowd before she managed to recover herself. "Minister McMahon," She said formally. "I recently came into possession of evidence that I felt the royal assembly should be privy to. I came to submit it."

Crusch approached the bench which the sages sat behind and handed them Felix's sworn testimony.

The sages read it quickly and their faces filled with dismay.

"Your excellencies," Crusch interjected.

The sages all looked at her.

"I would like to remind everyone that although Pierre can not be cross-examined, and this evidence perhaps could not be admitted at trial, it should be considered as new grounds that requires us to find Subaru Natsuki immediately and ascertain the truth of these allegations."

The sages were all staring at Crusch incredulously.

McMahon seemed horrified. He struggled to speak. "Lady Crusch... how many... other people are aware of this evidence?"

Crusch frowned. *Why would he ask me that?* "Sir Felix has already submitted it to the Ganaks archive as required by law. And I have already dropped a copy of this deposition off at the capitol archives before submitting it to this august body as the law dictates."

McMahon's jaw worked but no sound emerged. Finally he murmured. "How... efficient of you..."

Crusch began to feel uncomfortable. *Why is McMahon reacting like this? He never seemed to be devoted to Subaru Natsuki before. Why is an unsubstantiated accusation against Subaru affecting McMahon this way? Why does the entire sages' council look so uncomfortable?* She cleared her throat. "Excuse me, but I can't help but notice that the entire assembly has been convened. May I know the question at issue? Also, as a member of this assembly in good standing, might I ask why was I not summoned to this debate?"

Victoire stood in the underground depths of the Archives, her delicate, manicured hand wrapped around the throat of a skinny, bald man. She effortlessly held him high off the ground, his feet kicking the air.

In her other hand, she held a key.

Victoire stood in a massive underground room, bigger than a house. A huge concrete stairway led down to a smooth flat floor and an enormous vault door easily sixty feet across. It was made of smooth concrete and was emblazoned with an enormous, stylized sun symbol.

"Open the Vault," Victoire hissed.

"I... can't!" The librarian protested.

The old man choked as Victoire's grip tightened. "Old man, I have been working on this fucking plan for decades. On top of that, I have just spent a truly aggravating couple of days, dealing with my least favorite person in the world. You do not fucking wish to make me any angrier. Open the Vault before I open your guts!"

"I... can't!" The old man rasped. "I... need the key!"

Victoire waved the key back and forth, right in front of his face. "Are you fucking blind as well as stupid?" Victoire asked in a mock-patient voice.

The old man struggled to shake his head. "That's... not..."

"Hey, Victoire!" A voice rang out across the cavernous room.

Victoire spun around and saw Subaru and Emilia standing calmly at the top of the stairs.

"Looking for this?" Subaru held out Anri's key.

Victoire's face went stiff. There was a snapping sound from the bald man's neck and his body went limp. Victoire dropped the old man's body without a backward glance. She held up the key in her hand inspecting it. "How-"

"I swiped one of the keys from the hall while you weren't paying attention," Subaru explained. "Honestly, you made this embarrassingly easy."

Victoire scowled up at them. "Give me that fucking key!" She hissed.

"You know, Victoire," Subaru mused. "You're actually pretty decent at this."

"I believed you," Emilia admitted.

"We both bought it hook, line, and sinker," Subaru agreed as they started to walk casually down the stairs. "You made just one mistake."

Victoire's eyes narrowed.

"You mentioned us meeting a Sin Archbishop in Ganaks," Subaru said.

"But we never told you that Subaru met Lye," Emilia added.

"We never even told Anri!" Subaru said. "So how did you know that I met him?"

"Now that I think about it, Subaru," Emilia mused. "Victoire was the one who told you to go to that restaurant, wasn't she?" Emilia said.

"And that's where I discovered that the 'contact' that she told me about didn't exist," Subaru said.

Emilia glared at her. "You knew that Subaru met Lye because you knew that Lye would be there that night. You threw Subaru into Lye's path hoping that he'd kill Subaru for you!" Emilia hissed as they reached the bottom landing of the enormous stairway.

Victoire scowled up at them. "Give me the key, you dirty faggots."

"Yeah, that's going to be a hard pass, Victoire," Subaru said, slipping the key into his pocket.

Emilia summoned her ice sword.

Victoire flashed them a wolf's smile. "Good!" She breathed as she started walking up the stairs toward them. "You'll never know what this fucking week has been like for my marvelous person! Having to stare into your ugly faces when all I wanted to do was give you bamboo manicures right up to your knuckles!" She hissed. "But that's all over now. I couldn't steal the key from Anri or the magic would be broken. But I sure as fuck can take it away from you!"

Victoire burst into insane laughter. "You should have just handed me the fucking key, you festering cock-stains! Now I'm going to peel the skin off your bones nice and slow! I'm going to enjoy this!" She screamed as she rushed toward them, her hands raised and her fingernails lengthening into claws.

Subaru didn't blink. He triggered *Indomitable* and punched Victoire in the face as hard as he could. She went flying the other way and with a sound like thunder, Victoire crashed into the Vault door-

Where her body exploded into black sludge that ran down the stone wall.

Subaru stared in shock as the viscous black goo gathered together and reshaped itself into a short, slender girl with blond hair and burning red eyes that blazed with hatred. Her face was fixed in a lunatic grin.

"*Capella?!!*" Subaru gasped.

Emilia's eyes widened and she fell into a guard stance.

Capella had changed her outfit. Now she was wearing a skintight black outfit that left her shoulders bare. She wore tights and a flashy, red half-skirt that spread out in strips of cloth like the petals of a flower. The garish ensemble brought to mind images of a twisted, nightmarish showgirl or stage performer.

Capella laughed shrilly. "The Gospel said that I wasn't supposed to kill you! And I couldn't risk tipping off Anri about who I was! I had to play nice with you fags all week and wait for Anri to trust me! Wait for her to get scared! Wait for her to get desperate enough to open the Vault! But you kept getting in my fucking way! I kept trying to get someone else to kill you but you just wouldn't fucking die! Elsa should have been able to kill you and then I would have killed her to earn Anri's trust! Instead you somehow managed to kill that numb cunt!"

"I tried drinking all the medicine to finish you off but that just made that tit-less wonder Anri angry and she sends me away to play mailman! Lye *should* have killed you! But you actually sat down with the useless queer and had a romantic candlelight dinner! Finally, I got frustrated and just told Griest where to find Anri but then you attacked the whole fucking army before I could sneak in and 'rescue' her!"

"Do you think that we care?" Subaru demanded incredulously. "Do you think that we're looking to hear more about how 'tough' you've had it?"

"Maybe we should come back later, Subaru," Emilia said, sounding bored. "We have a lot to do. We aren't accomplishing very much by just standing here and listening to Capella feel sorry for herself."

Capella hissed. "I'm not supposed to kill you," She said doubtfully. Then her face brightened. "But you'd be surprised what you can live through. I'm going to make you watch. I'll make you both watch while I slowly peel off your lover's skin layer by layer. I'll break every bone in your bodies and then I'll suck out your organs.

"*Then* I'll use my Authority to bring you both back to perfect health! I'm going to do it over and over for weeks until I finally get bored and then I'll leave you both blind, deaf, mute paraplegics. I'll leave you both living corpses unable to think of anything but death's release but I'll give you no way to obtain it! I'll-"

"Mili," Subaru sighed. "Do you think that she's almost done?"

Emilia shrugged.

Capella gaped in shock at being interrupted. "Fuck you!" Capella screamed.

"Witty retort," Subaru yawned.

Capella fumed and her face became very still. "What's all this? Just because you have the strongest Authority, you think that you're better than me?" Capella whispered in a tone which suggested that the consequences for giving the wrong answer to that question would be truly dire.

"Of course, we are," Subaru said scoffed.

Capella's jaw dropped and her eyes widened. For the first time in God knew how long, the Sin Archbishop was rendered speechless.

Subaru folded his arms with a smirk. "Like you said, we thwarted your plan every step of the way. And we didn't even *know* about it! That's how clumsy all of these stupid ideas you're pitching are! Listening to you bitch is boring because none of your plans make any sense! You were never able to convince Anri to trust you enough to go off alone with you and open the Vault because you're a terrible actress and you have no idea how to manipulate people except for terrorizing them! You never even gave Anri a decent reason to *consider* opening the Vault! Hell, you probably couldn't have convinced her to open it even if we hadn't been there!"

"You could have just told Anri that we were dead after we went into Ganaks," Emilia shrugged. "She probably would have believed you."

"Yeah!" Subaru snorted. "If you'd succeeded in bringing Anri back to Siros, how long do you really think it would have been before you were found out? Did you actually think that she would open that Vault without talking to her Grandfather first and asking about you? What were you going to say when he revealed that he'd never heard of you before?"

"You never even *had* a coherent plan for getting in the Vault! Instead, you're just blundering around and trying to succeed by accident," Subaru said contemptuously. "You had an *unbelievable* advantage! You knew all of your opponents' plans and goals! You even sat there while we were cooking most of our strategies up and you *still* found a way to lose! You played this game so badly that your opponents didn't even realize that anyone else *was* playing! There's a term for people like that, Capella: *losers*," Subaru said as insultingly as he could.

Capella was panting for breath and her red eyes were completely mad. Her mouth stretched into an inhumanly wide, lunatic grin. "I don't care anymore!" She whispered. "I don't care if the Gospel says not to kill you! I'm going to rip you both limb from limb!"

Capella sprang up the stairs, her limbs stretching and elongating grotesquely. She bounded up the steps on all fours, her long thin limbs lifting her high off the ground, leaving her looking like some monstrous spider.

"Ready?!" Subaru shouted.

"Ready!" Emilia nodded.

The pair bolted back up the stairs.

Capella roared with laughter. "You're not getting away! I'm going to-"

Her foot slipped out from underneath her and Capella went cartwheeling down the hard stone steps where her face smashed hard against the concrete floor. Most of her body broke apart into a puddle of black slime.

Capella pulled her body back together and stood up, disoriented and shaking her head. She looked at the stairs and saw that they had been coated in a thin layer of ice.

"Hey, you were right, Mili!" Subaru called in a good-natured tone.

Capella looked up and saw Subaru and Emilia smirking from the top of the stairs.

Subaru laughed. "She really *was* dumb enough to fall for it!"

"I told you, Subaru," Emilia said smugly. "You owe me a gold coin."

Capella screamed in rage and her body swelled into enormity, becoming the colossal, red eyed, black dragon.

"Come on!" Subaru shouted as he and Emilia sprinted around the corner and out of sight.

The Marquis de Feir was an extremely old man. Even in his youth, physical exertion outside of the bedroom had never appealed to him and with each passing decade it had appealed to him less.

Feir had spent a little over a week at his summer estate just outside of Fleur enjoying a brief absence from the busy life at court, as well as the attentions of a few eager young maids, now that his nosy relatives were no longer in attendance to disapprove of his harmless fun.

Feir had found the long carriage ride home to the capitol extremely fatiguing and had been fighting a monstrous headache. He wanted nothing more than to retire into a warm bath liberally sprinkled with frangipani that morning. However, a note had been handed him almost as soon as he walked in the door.

"Urgent. Come to the palace immediately. Brook no delay. Georg of Monmouth."

Thus, the Marquis had jumped right back into his carriage and raced to the palace hunting up and down the halls for his dear friend.

He was currently searching the balcony seats above the royal assembly chamber.

"Feir!" Georg whispered.

Feir saw Georg sitting some distance away from everyone. Georg had always been a serious man, rarely given to mirth

and levity but today his features were carved with an extra gravity.

Feir rushed over to his friend and collapsed into the comfortable chair beside him, panting for breath.

"I haven't... run that far... since I was twenty," The old man gasped.

"It was not wasted effort, my friend, believe me," Georg said in a grim voice. "Have you been following what has been happening?"

"My dear Georg, I have been incommunicado outside of Fleur for the past week! I left shortly after Priscilla Barielle's triumph following the Whale Hunt! What could possibly have happened to demand this kind of response?"

Georg stared down at the royal assembly chamber. Much larger than the fairly small council room reserved for the ranking sage council, the royal assembly boasted several dozen members including nobles of note, powerful merchants, and influential figures of all kinds.

Georg's lips thinned. "I think that you're about to witness a coup."

"What?!" Feir shouted.

Georg shot Feir a dirty look and Feir wisely lowered his voice. "What?"

Georg was silent for a moment staring darkly down at the gathering royal assembly. "In the past two weeks, Subaru Natsuki's faction has slain the White Whale, rescued an entire community of demi-humans and a separate community of human refugees from certain death at the hands of the Witch Cult, and personally killed two Sin Archbishops with his bare hands."

Feir stared at Georg, waiting for this to be one of his friend's extremely rare jokes. "By the Gods," Feir finally whispered. "I never imagined that we had underestimated Subaru Natsuki to this extent. These would be legendary achievements accomplished over a lifetime, much less over two weeks. I suppose the royal selection is effectively over."

"Oh yes," Georg said bitterly. "It's *over*." He emphasized.

Capella dragged herself up the stairs and thrust her immense body through the huge concrete tunnels that lay under the Archives. Her only thought was to catch the objects of her loathing and devour them. Logically, Capella knew that this enormous body was a hindrance in the tight confines of these tunnels but Capella was beyond caring. Capella was *angry*. Like everything else about her, Capella's rage was grand, profound, and all-encompassing. The Sin Archbishop simply demanded a body large enough to express the magnitude of her rage.

The tunnels were a tight fit but Capella was still moving fast. She forced her body through the passage like a burrowing snake, snapping at the fleeing Subaru and Emilia who ran just ahead of her jaws.

The pair turned the corner and Capella's eyes lit up as they made a mistake. They turned down the wrong way of a passage. There was no exit from there. Just a blind wall a dozen yards down.

Capella thrust herself forward, anxious to cut off her prey's retreat before they realized their error.

She found Subaru and Emilia in the narrow tunnel, staring at the walls around them in horror.

Capella flung herself forward, her huge snapping jaws filling the entire tunnel.

Then she slammed them shut on empty air.

Capella inspected the tunnel in a fury. The tunnels on this level were just a bit narrower than the others below. She couldn't fit through as a dragon.

Capella glared in fury at the two tiny insects standing just inches away from her snapping fangs.

Capella considered shifting to a smaller form then decided against it. Instead, her reptilian lips took on an amused smirk.

She opened her mouth wide to show them the fire building up deep in her gullet. She'd let them savor their own approaching deaths before she cooked them to ash.

Capella took a deep breath and opened her jaws wider in preparation of releasing her fire. She met the noxious worms' eyes and a shadow of doubt entered her mind. She had expected eyes that were filled with fear, hopelessness, and despair. Instead, Subaru and Emilia's eyes were hard, cold and fixed.

Subaru leaped forward and triggered *Indomitable*. He punched her lower jaw hard and forced her mouth to slam shut, her sharp teeth spearing into the roof of her own mouth.

Capella tried to roar with pain but her jaw wouldn't open. She suddenly realized that the elf had frozen a dozen rings of thick ice around her jaws, clamping them shut.

Capella sensed the pests bolting past her but at the moment, Capella had bigger problems. The fire that she had summoned was still building up inside of her and it had nowhere to go. Capella fought desperately to open her jaws, slamming her head against the concrete in a desperate attempt to break the ice that was lining her jaw but the ice bands were in a place that she couldn't reach no matter what she tried.

She tried to change shape but the pressure building up inside of her was too great.

Capella's body bulged grotesquely as it struggled to contain the fury of her fire.

Then the dragon exploded like an overstuffed water-balloon. Black flames filled the hall and black sludge splattered everywhere.

Capella slowly and painfully pulled herself back together, taking on her 'young girl' appearance. Her head was spinning and her legs were wobbling as she struggled to collect herself, physically and mentally.

A moment later, her eyes cleared and blazed with hatred. She flung herself up the tunnel toward the entrance, her shape becoming... loose. Parts of her body grew dragon claws, bear fur, human skin, and other features more exotic still. Capella was too enraged to control her shape any longer. She raced after Subaru and Emilia, loping on all fours like an animal.

"Ladies," Lord Montefort said bowing to the three princesses, "You wished to see me?" A hooded man in sandals and a strange pink robe stood just behind him.

"Yes, Lord Montefort," Crusch said struggling for calm. "Thank you for seeing us all on such short notice. The three of us actually share some concerns. There is a rumor going around that the royal council intends to suspend the royal selection."

"Regrettably, this is true," Montefort commiserated. "With Subaru Natsuki and the Witch of Envy roaming the land, we are now in a state of emergency. It requires a certain... flexibility."

"I don't understand," Priscilla said through clenched teeth. "When will the selection be restarted?"

"When the situation is again under control," Montefort said in a friendly tone. "And when we have decided the victor."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Anastasia demanded.

"The three of you are all *fantastic* disappointments," Montefort continued in the same kind voice. "The first duty of a king is to protect his people from external threats. The three of you failed to protect the Kingdom from a no-name foreign interloper of no known lineage who came here with nothing but the clothes on his back. This is a comical lack of political ability. It has required us to take matters into our own hands. This is extremely inconvenient to me personally as it was I who convinced the others that allowing the election to occur in the first place was in our best interests. It's all turned out to be rather embarrassing for me, I must say."

The three princesses gaped at him. Priscilla shook her head. "You can't just... cancel the selection! You don't have that authority!" Priscilla cried.

"Between myself, Willard Picket, and Lord Zyst, we control the royal assembly. You'll find that we have all the authority in the kingdom," Montefort continued in the same friendly voice.

"No wonder you want to cancel the selection," Crusch growled. "A new king would threaten your power!"

"Oh, Crusch," Montefort shook his head fondly. "You're so much like your father. We aren't electing a king. We're electing a hat-rack."

The princesses looked at one another in confusion.

"Your purpose," Montefort continued, "Is simply to wear the crown, mouth polite formula phrases to the dragon to keep our alliance intact, and have fat babies to continue your bloodline."

"I hope you realize that if I am elected King, the pact with the dragon will end," Crusch said firmly.

"And I hope *you* realize that you will have no say in the matter, whatsoever," Montefort continued in the same kindly tone. "The dragon gives our kingdom an absolute guarantee of protection from hostile incursions. Can you even imagine the advantages afforded to Lagunica by not needing to devote substantial military resources to defense? You or Anastasia will be king, we're still debating the relative benefits you offer. Anastasia will be easier to control but her gutter born blood is of no value, while Crusch would be more difficult to control but has the benefit of a long and noble bloodline. Oh! And congratulations, Lady Crusch! At the moment I think that you are in the lead for the throne but there's still a great deal of discussion to be had."

Crusch's mind filled with flames. "I will not endure your insolence any longer, Montefort! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now!" Crusch said, drawing her sword.

"Felix Argyle," Monteford said calmly, not missing a beat.

Crusch's blade froze in place. "What?" Crusch gasped.

"Yes, I meant to offer my sympathies to you today for his strange disappearance," He commiserated. "I can only imagine what you're feeling at the loss of that... person," Montefort said curling his lip in distaste. "However, be of good cheer. I'm certain that if you and I work closely together, we can find a way to restore him to you."

Crusch's hand was shaking.

Montefort turned to face Anastasia who wore a snarl on her face. "Oh, and Lady Anatasia I'm terribly sorry about Julius

and your... kitten," Montefort's face again took on a look of disgust.

Anastasia looked shocked.

"Apparently your spirited little animal Mimi became involved with last night's riot. Numerous witnesses saw her attacking the city guard and working with the Witch Cultist saboteur. I'm afraid that she's been arrested on charges of sedition."

Anastasia was pale with rage. "That's not possible! She was with *me* last night. She was nowhere *near* the castle! I demand to speak with these witnesses!"

"Oh, I couldn't allow that," Montefort replied in a friendly tone. "You might intimidate them. I'm afraid that these witnesses will have to remain secret. But rest assured, I will not permit the judge to render a verdict until he is absolutely certain of their truthfulness."

"And just what have you done to Julius?" Anastasia demanded.

"Oh, it was simply terrible. I'm afraid that he died in battle near Ganaks. A tragic loss for our country. Unfortunately, the Juukulius family is quite influential. While no one would particularly care about the disappearance of a jumped-up cat demi-human, even if he is a knight and the theoretical bastard of a noble family, making Julius disappear was more trouble than it was worth. An investigation would certainly be called for. Thus he gets an honorable death and Miss Mimi takes his place under our care to ensure your good behavior."

Anastasia's face went pale.

Priscilla folded her arms. "I assume that you've also kidnapped Al."

"Indeed."

"I hope you don't think you can control me that way!" Priscilla sneered.

"Alas, I have belatedly come to that conclusion," Montefort admitted. "I always believed that there was indeed some affection between the two of you and that you were some manner of tsundere. I now realize that you are simply a bitch."

Priscilla's jaw dropped.

Montefort shrugged. "In point of fact, Aldebaran managed to escape from my trap. I have no idea where he is or what he's doing. However, that fortunately is not a problem as I have recently discovered that I don't really need to control you. You are now out of the running for the royal selection."

"What?!" Priscilla shouted.

Montefort looked apologetic. "Initially, I thought that your Vollachian royal blood might be a useful means of seeking closer ties with our greatest foe but I recently spoke to your beloved half-brother, Emperor Vincent-

Priscilla snarled in rage.

"And he explained that he considers you to be mainly an irritant. Thus, you have no value to our country's goals and beyond that, you are annoying as hell," He said bluntly. "Therefore, you may consider yourself out of the running for the throne. I must suggest that you remove yourself from Lagunica entirely, for reasons of your health."

Priscilla glared at him but she now spoke in a calmer, more measured tone. "You do realize that if I return to Vollachia, I will certainly be killed."

"You should also realize that a similar fate awaits you if you remain here. I'd say that you have quite a problem," Montefort commiserated.

Priscilla bared her teeth. With a savage yell she drew her Yang sword out of thin air and lunged at Montefort's chest.

The sword stroke was parried.

"Come on, pretty girl, you should smile! You'd look so much more beautiful with a smile on your face!" The hooded man said in a friendly voice. He pulled back his hood revealing blue hair and a face that was handsome to the point of being pretty.

Priscilla glowered at him. "Cecilius Segmunt. Montefort, what is a Divine General of the Vollachia Empire doing here?!"

"He's something of an ambassador of good will," Montefort explained calmly. "Emperor Vincent shares our concerns about the state of the royal selection and has offered to assist us in dealing with Subaru Natsuki."

Anastasia stared at Montefort open mouthed. "Why in the world would the Emperor of Vollachia possibly care about Subaru Natsuki?" Anastasia demanded.

"Oh, isn't it obvious? No, I suppose not. My fault. I forgot that I was speaking to children," Montefort mused.

The three princesses scowled at Montefort.

"Can I assume that the three of you are at least passingly aware of the great civil war that occurred in Lagunica fifty years ago? The war where demi-humans across the country took up arms to demand equality and respect? Can anyone

tell me why the right side won that war?"

Crusch gave him a baffled look. "Because the former Sword Saint finally started assisting us-"

"No, no, no, Lady Crusch," Montefort sighed. "You really are *so much* like your father. You simply don't see the webs within the webs. Theresia van Astrea's assistance was simply detail. The war could have ended in three years or thirteen years or thirty years but victory was inevitable from the start."

"Because?" Anastasia said in an unsteady voice.

"Because my grandfather, and a variety of other farsighted men of the kingdom, spared no effort to remind the human peasantry that any social and economic gains made by the demi-humans would come directly at their own expense," Montefort explained. "This ensured that the human lower classes viewed the demi-humans as threats to what little they had, as well as dangerous enemies. The war might have ended swiftly or it could have dragged on but because they were fighting alone, the demi-humans simply lacked the power, both militarily and politically to make any significant changes in the kingdom. Unfortunately, now we have to deal with Subaru Natsuki."

"Stop speaking in riddles!" Priscilla growled.

Anastasia frowned. "Subaru rescued the humans of Arlem village," Anastasia said in dawning understanding. "Then he rescued the demi-humans of the Sanctuary. He's spoken over and over again about equal rights for demi-humans as well raising the standards of living for the underclasses. My reports indicate that the demi-humans of the Sanctuary have fled to Arlem and been welcomed with open arms. They're building a thriving community together, humans and demi-humans living side by side."

"Very perceptive, Lady Anastasia," Montefort complimented. "Subaru, by accident or ingenuity, has stumbled upon a very dangerous political strategy. Therein lies our problem."

Crusch's eyes widened. "Subaru Natsuki has convinced both the poor humans *and* the demi-humans that he hears their sorrows and that he will be their champion," Crusch continued Anastasia's point, her tone one of shocked revelation. "If they start viewing each other as allies instead of rivals, they'll break the power structure of the kingdom wide open. If those two factions joined forces, that's an army numbering in the millions! There aren't enough knights and mages in the kingdom to fight *that* many people!"

"At last you understand," Montefort said smiling. "Sir Reinhard would have made the situation manageable, once we had convinced him that him slaughtering these subversives would prevent more bloodletting in the long run but Subaru Natsuki has managed to acquire his loyalty as well. Subaru Natsuki is either an authentic strategic genius or the luckiest bastard in recorded history. Regardless, he is a threat that has been ignored for too long already. Subaru must be done away with immediately."

"I don't understand," Priscilla said. "Why wouldn't you wait until the election was over before making this move? If the vote shifted you wouldn't have had to do anything. You could always just kill him after the election if he won."

"Do you really think that I'm going to give Subaru Natsuki another two years to build his power base?" Montefort asked in disbelief. "Besides, by your own admissions, you think the selection is over! None of you have the ability to compete with that boy politically. You simply lack the skills and the talent."

Anastasia shook her head. "You're making this all *very* complicated. Why not just rig the vote then?" She asked in confusion.

Montefort sighed. "So *very* naive. Even if by some chance Subaru Natsuki were to lose, he would certainly raise a rebellion and bring a civil war down on all our heads."

"And you think that killing him will avert that?" Crusch demanded. "You'll just make him into a martyr!"

"Doubtlessly," Montefort agreed. "But his killer has to be either a human or a demi-human, doesn't it? As long as one side blames the other, our problem is solved!" Montefort shrugged. "In any event, ladies, I need to get ready to present evidence of Subaru's witchcraft to the council. If you'll excuse me?"

"Do you *have* any evidence?" Crusch demanded intently.

"No, not that it really matters. Your ludicrous report of the Witch of Envy being freed was most useful however, Lady Crusch. I was worried that I couldn't make a flimsy accusation stick but now I have the unassailable integrity of the House of Karnstein backing me up. I can't imagine what you were trying to accomplish with such a ridiculous gambit but it serves my needs well enough. Subaru Natsuki will be declared a Witch. I'm sure that you'll be only too happy to vote for it in council, Lady Crusch. Felix will be terribly disappointed if you fail to vote the proper way."

Crusch bit her tongue.

"In the meantime, I strongly suggest that you and Lady Anastasia start deciding which one of you most wants to be our obedient little hat-rack," Montefort said pleasantly.

Anastasia scowled. "What if neither of us is willing to work for you?" Anastasia demanded.

Montefort looked thoughtful. "Well, Mimi and Felix would suffer for your intransigence but I assume that you already knew that," Montefort mused. "I suppose that we could find other ways to control you but that really does sound like too much bother. I suppose we'd simply crown one of you and explain your disappearance from public view by your poor health. You *will* become pregnant as soon as possible, even if narcotics or restraints are required, and once you deliver

your heir you become expendable. A regency would suit us right down to the ground. That's how my grandfather managed to keep King Gionis so obedient. He raised Gionis like his own pet, you know. I've always admired Grandfather. It would please me greatly to be able to follow in his footsteps," He finished with a smile, entering the council chamber.

Cecilus blew the princesses a kiss and then followed Montefort inside.

Crusch and Anastasia were ashen faced while Priscilla was livid was rage. She glanced at her peers. "You both realize that you'll never get your people back, right? They'll be permanent prisoners and they'll be tortured and executed at whatever moment most benefits Montefort."

"We know that, Priscilla!" Anastasia snapped at her, her eyes wild. "We are very clear on our current situation! Now, do you have any suggestions for some way for us to get *out* of this situation?"

Strangely, Anastasia losing her temper seemed to have restored Priscilla's. "I might, in fact," She said. "But I scarcely think that this is the right place to discuss it."

Crusch let out a long, slow sigh. "I need to cast a vote, ladies. As long as Montefort's dagger is at Felix's throat, I am truly a prisoner. However, once the vote is cast, might I offer you the hospitality of my estate? I think that we have a great deal to talk about."

Anastasia and Priscilla nodded.

Subaru and Emilia raced out of the tunnels into an enormous concrete room beneath the Archives where the tunnels met the library. They saw Anri racing toward them, a legion of soldiers beside her. Anri was once again dressed in her traveling clothes and her rapier was belted at her side.

"Subaru!" Anri screamed. "The Vault! Did she-"

Subaru pulled the key out of his pocket and showed it to her. "Capella got nothing!" He shouted.

"What's going on here, Subaru? Who *is* Victoire?" Anri demanded as she and her men took position around the top of the huge winding stairwell that led down to the vault.

"Capella," Subaru said shortly. "She's the Sin Archbishop of Lust. She has the ability to change her shape and regenerate from seemingly fatal wounds. Her favorite shapes seem to be a black dragon, an enormous bear, and a little blond girl who needs to have her mouth washed out with soap!"

At that moment, Capella came charging up the stairs, running on three limbs. Her left arm had vanished and been replaced by a profusion of other limbs that grew out of her shoulder: an octopus tentacle, a chicken leg, two human hands, a limb that ended in a hoof, and something stubby that looked like a giant caterpillar's leg.

Capella threw herself up the stairs with a roar, heedless of the crowd of soldiers waiting.

Capella leaped high into the air and landed on a soldier like some mad octopus, grabbing him with all her arms and ripping his body to pieces.

Emilia blasted Capella with a hurricane gust of wind that was cold beyond imagining. The Sin Archbishop was blown back against the wall where she crashed to the ground, shivering and struggling to break a thin layer of frost off her body.

The soldiers around Capella sprang into action, jabbing her with their spears but Capella barely seemed to noticed. She swung her strange deformed 'arms' and the soldiers all went flying, many of them striking the walls with crushing force and then falling limp to the ground.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and threw himself at Capella. She dodged his first punch so Subaru gave her a hard kick to the stomach and the Sin Archbishop exploded into slush, the remnants of her body flying backward to splatter and slid down the wall in a wet heap.

The black muck dragged itself together again, albeit more slowly this time. Capella got back to her feet, now having the right number of limbs. She looked both tired and livid.

"Keep it up!" Subaru shouted at the surrounding soldiers. "She's slowing down!"

The soldiers sounded a cheer that sounded as frightened as it was enthusiastic.

Capella scowled and threw herself at the soldiers. Her body grew a huge number of long, sharp, insect-like limbs out of her back that lifted her high above the ground. "Enough of this bullshit! Get out of my fucking way!" Capella charged forward on her long spindly limbs like some monstrous spider, her own body dangling comically in midair.

Capella's sudden rush took everyone by surprise and even Subaru and Emilia were sent flying. Subaru triggered *Indomitable* to try and protect Emilia from the hard collision with the wall.

Capella raced for the exit back to the Archive proper and to freedom.

Anri stood in her path.

Oh God! Anri! Subaru thought.

Subaru and Emilia fought their way back to their feet and raced toward Anri but it was clear that they'd be far too late.

Anri's face was pale but composed. Capella saw Anri and her face twisted with hate. She dove at the girl thrusting all of her sharp, stabbing limbs at her.

Anri desperately slashed her rapier through the maddened Archbishop's throat.

Capella screamed and jerked back. The cut had already healed but her eyes huge and her hands wrapped around her throat. Her extra spider limbs retracted.

"The fuck?!" Capella demanded, looking like an ordinary girl and shaking her head in obvious pain. "What is that frigging sword?"

Anri briefly looked startled but then she smiled. "This is the Royal sword of House Ithil!" Anri declared proudly. "My dear friend Subaru enchanted it. It is now a bane to all evil things! It may not harm your flesh but each cut will score your soul!"

Capella's eyes bulged. "Bullshit! There's no such spell! Get out of my way, you posturing tit-less wonder!"

Capella lunged at Anri but Anri slashed her rapier through Capella's arm and the Archbishop gave a startled yelp. She leaped back, staring at Anri in disbelief.

Subaru and Emilia reached Anri's side, flanking her.

Subaru let out a loud, cold laugh. Everyone in the room turned to him. "When was the last time that you felt pain, Capella?" He asked conversationally.

"Fuck off, you limp-dick cock-sucker!" Capella hissed.

"I bet it's been a while," Subaru mused. "I mean, your body is very impressive-"

"My body is perfect," Capella whispered in a deathly voice. "Beauty and grace incarnate..."

Subaru coughed. "Yeah yeah, sure, whatever," He muttered. "Still, no matter how resilient your body is, it's not much help if you fail to protect your own soul, is it?"

"How much shit do you eat for all of this crap to be falling out of your mouth?!" Capella snapped.

Subaru shrugged. "You're right, I'm lying. That sword doesn't hurt you at all. It doesn't bypass all your defenses and cut at your very being..."

Capella blinked and her face suddenly looked uncertain. "I'm immortal, dickweed!" She proclaimed.

"Really?" Subaru said with a knowing leer. "Let's just put that to the test, shall we?"

Capella screamed in fury and flung herself at Subaru, Emilia, and Anri. She began to swell into enormity, becoming the gigantic black bear.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and punched her right in her frothing maw.

The bear bellowed in pain and dismay as it exploded out around Subaru's fist.

The vile sludge landed everywhere. Large clumps of it lay still on the floor for a moment before they slowly began to move together again.

Subaru tried to stomp on the sludge but this had no effect.

Emilia froze several pieces but the sludge shuddered and shook until it broke free of the ice blocks and continued to reassemble.

Anri slashed several pieces which jerked away from her sword. Anri kept stabbing the sludge but for each piece she harassed, more and more rejoined the main body.

Capella slowly took shape as a vague outline of a girl with muted colors.

"I'm going to feed you all to rats when I'm done!" Capella screamed, sounding like she was talking through a mouthful of jelly.

Anri abandoned the clumps and rushed at Capella.

The Archbishop raised arms that were as undefined as lumps of clay and as big as cricket bats. She swung a heavy blow at Anri.

The princess dodged it and thrust her rapier at Capella's heart.

Capella leaped back to try to avoid it but her form wasn't solid yet and her body broke apart at the thighs.

The Archbishop landed heavily on her back and Anri charged toward her, stabbing at her head but Capella rolled away. Her body was rapidly reassembling itself and her normal colors returned.

Before Capella could move, Anri stabbed Capella right through her back, desperately trying to pin the Archbishop down. The Archbishop screamed, more in fear than in pain.

The center of Capella's torso split apart into what looked like thousands of wriggling black tendrils that writhed and lashed convulsively, struggling to avoid the rapier blade that lay through her torso.

"Get away from me!" She screamed, trying to pull herself off the rapier. Her arms formed enormous bear claws that sank deep into the stone floor. Capella dragged herself away from Anri using furry arms that were at least twice the size of her torso, slowly tearing herself free of the rapier, inch by inch.

Capella swung an enormous arm at Anri. Anri leaped back to dodge it.

Subaru and Emilia threw themselves on top of Capella and pinned her down.

"Get off me, you sweaty piss-ants!" She screamed, her head growing enormous as she shifted into a dragon.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and punched Capella's head as hard as he could. Capella's 'dragon head' burst into black sludge, falling off her normal face as if Capella had just vomited up buckets of black sludge.

Anri raced forward stabbed her sword through Capella's shoulder. Her shoulder began to lose shape and form as it unraveled into black tentacles that twisted and writhed to avoid touching the rapier.

Emilia blasted Capella with ice magic and a thin layer of frost covered the Archbishop like a full-body cast. For a moment, she struggled to move, even the tentacles slowed their writhing.

Capella collapsed on her face, looking like a normal girl again. "You can't kill me!" Capella screamed. "You can't kill me and when I get loose, I'm going to chew off every single one of your bits!"

"We can't hold her!" Anri screamed. "She's too powerful!"

"Powerful," Subaru whispered. "Hang on!" Subaru shouted, reaching into his bag.

Emilia and Anri tried desperately to restrain Capella as she quickly broke free of the frost. She began to shift into the dragon as Subaru pulled out the bracelet of black stones that he'd taken off of Julius.

Subaru brought them to Capella's still human arm and they snapped in place around her wrist as if they were magnetized.

Capella gave a deafening screech as her body vibrated and shook. Her body glowed bright red for a moment and then she collapsed limp against the floor. Subaru, Emilia and Anri lay panting on top of her.

Subaru looked down at Anri's sword that was still cutting through Capella's shoulder, making a small wound that was... bleeding.

Capella screamed and shook herself. "Get off me!"

Capella laboriously pushed Anri, Emilia, and Subaru off of her. They didn't try very hard to hold on but Capella still struggled to move them.

"I'm going to eat the shit-fucking lot of you, you pustulant bitches!" Capella screamed, making a face like she had a dragon's crushing teeth.

Capella blinked in surprise.

She swung her arm at a group of soldiers standing several yards away as if she intended to knock them flying with an enormous limb. The soldiers flinched but nothing else happened. Capella's arm didn't change a bit.

Capella's face went blank, staring at her bracelet in horrified realization. Capella wrenched at the bracelet but was unable to move it an inch. She fought to pull it off but succeeded in nothing more than breaking her fingernails.

With a maddened howl, she brought her arm to her mouth and sank her teeth into it, gnawing on the limb like a wolf trying to escape a trap.

Subaru sighed and looked over at the shell-shocked soldiers. "Any of you feel brave enough to try and *restrain* the powerless, one hundred pound girl?!" Subaru demanded loudly.

Several soldiers started, then leaped up and grabbed Capella. By now, Capella had gnawed her own limb down to the bone but her teeth couldn't manage to cut through it. Capella threw her head back, her face painted with a dark-red beard of blood. She fought like a wild animal, contorting and throwing herself around, kicking the soldiers, and desperately trying to get her face close enough to them to bite. As she was barely a hundred pounds of short, slender girl, this had little impact on the burly soldiers.

Anri stood up and marched over to Capella with a hard look on her face. Subaru noticed that the deep, gushing wound that Capella had chewed in her own arm had already healed.

Capella stopped thrashing around long enough to give Anri a look of loathing and a lunatic grin. "I will get out of this, Anri," She promised. "And then the first thing that I'll do is I'll find *you*, no-tits, and then I'll rip-"

Anri smacked Capella across the face with the hilt of her sword.

Capella's face was a hilarious caricature of shock.

Subaru snorted with laughter.

"That's for lying to me!" Anri said coldly. "And you don't get to call me 'Anri.' That privilege is reserved for my friends. Take her away!"

Capella screamed, spitting and cursing as the soldiers carried the helpless Sin Archbishop away. "You can't kill me! Even like this, you can't kill me! I'll get out of this, you limp-dick fuck-wits!"

Montefort approached the council chamber with a smile on his face and a song in his heart. Things had gone better than planned.

"Montefort!" A voice snapped.

Montefort turned around to see Lord Vatu, a powerful noble from northern Lagunican who had been a strong ally for many years. Vatu was scowling at him. Six other powerful nobles were with him and they all looked furious.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Montefort said with a smile. "What can I do for you?"

Vatu bared his teeth. "Is this your idea of a joke?!" He demanded.

Montefort frowned. He was unaccustomed to being addressed that way, especially by his own allies but he let it roll off his back. "I'm not sure that I understand."

In answer, Vatu held up a sheet of paper and literally slapped Montefort's chest with it.

Montefort glared at Vatu for a long moment and then took the paper and read it.

His eyes bulged out. "Where did this come from?" He whispered.

"Your *pet*, Crusch Karnstein, dropped it on the floor on the council chamber this morning!" Vatu yelled.

Montefort looked up from the paper, his jaw hanging open.

"When Crusch submitted this into evidence, we all almost died of shock! Are you *trying* to make us look duplicitous?!" Vatu demanded. "We've stuck our necks out to support you in this ridiculous witch trial! Now you pull a stunt like this? Last minute testimony that arrives in the nick of time from an untitled, dead man who can't even be questioned?!"

Montefort took a deep breath. "My lord Vatu," Montefort said, fighting for calm. "I assure you that I knew nothing of this. Crusch Karnstein acted entirely on her own."

Vatu looked away with a snort. Montefort realized uncomfortably that the others looked equally skeptical.

"Montefort," Vatu spat, "This is absurd! It is the most transparent, ham-fisted attempt at political manipulation I have ever encountered! What is wrong with you?! Your grandfather would never have made a blunder like this!"

Montefort's face went blank. He put a calm smile back on his face by sheer will power. "Whatever blunders have brought us here," He said in a dangerously quiet voice. "The important thing is to put the trial behind us as soon as possible. That way we can all focus on opposing Gusteko's territorial ambitions and reclaiming Ganaks. I assume that we are still all united on that front?"

The other nobles scowled and looked at each other. "Yes," Vatu grumbled. "We are agreed in this matter."

"Splendid," Montefort said calmly. "Now, if you will all excuse me for a bit? I have something I must attend to straight away."

Montefort walked away and his normally placid face twisted into a rare scowl.

Anri rubbed her head. "Ugh. I'm exhausted. How is it still only morning?!"

Subaru, Emilia and Anri were standing outside the Archives, enjoying the morning sun. They were all exhausted.

Subaru shrugged. "Fighting a Sin Archbishop takes a lot out of you. Take my word for it. This was my *sixth* fight with one of them!"

Anri shook her head. "The mere fact that you can say that and not be lying raises serious questions about your sanity, Subaru. After all this, I'm not sure that I'm willing to just let you two leave," She quipped. "I might need you guys to fight the next avalanche or summer storm!"

Subaru chuckled. "Yup, that's Gusteko hospitality for you. They never let you leave!"

"Hospitality is one of our country's most sacred traditions!" An enormous man boomed as he emerged from the Archive. Radu walked out beside him.

"Subaru, Emilia, this is my grandfather, Patriarch Gustov of the Holy Church," Anri said.

Subaru bowed slightly. "Patriarch."

"Lord Subaru," Gustov said bowing low. "My deepest thanks for your heroism that protected my people and still more for your safekeeping of my granddaughter!"

Subaru gave a weary smile. "Really, we were happy to do it."

"Anri is a dear friend," Emilia agreed.

Gustov smiled. "And I must also thank you for helping to protect our sacred Archives from that monster. I know of that changeling. She's been trying to break into the Vault for centuries, if not longer. To see her actually captured is a wonder to behold."

Anri shook her head. "This time she seemed to have come up with a more elaborate plan that very nearly worked, Grandfather."

He nodded. "It is thanks to all of your courage that it did not."

"Grandfather, was anything taken from the Archives?" Anri asked intently.

"Oh, right," Subaru said, pulling the key out of his pocket and handing it to Anri. "I almost forget to return this."

Anri tied it to her necklace with a sigh of relief.

Gustov shook his head. "All is present and accounted for. The monster sought only what was in the Vault."

"What's in there anyway?" Subaru asked Anri.

"Good question," She replied, looking up at Gustov meaningfully.

Gustov shifted uncomfortably.

Radu chuckled. "I think that you can tell her what we know, Father. She'll be your ruler in a few months."

Gustov gave him an amused look. "Son, did I ever tell you that you share your mother's bluntness?"

Radu shrugged. "Family trait," He gestured toward Anri.

Anri slowly processed what Radu had said and looked at him in shock. "Wait! Uncle Radu, what do you mean 'a few months?!'"

Radu gave her a look of fond exasperation. "Anri, the nobles were already prepared to back your claim to the throne. Now you've faced down a Sin Archbishop and captured her! When the nobles find out, I fear that if I don't announce your coronation at the next council meeting, I will be facing down a lynch mob!"

Anri didn't appear to know what to say. Her eyes darted back and forth between the old men. "Grandfather, what's in that Vault?" She said, desperately trying to change the subject.

Gustov sighed. "You've asked me that question many times before."

"If I'm going to be the ruler," Anri growled at Radu in annoyance, "Then I think I have the right to know!"

"I... cannot tell you what I do not know, little Anri," Gustov said slowly.

"What?!"

"I do not know what is in that Vault," Gustov said. "No one living does."

Anri stared at him. "You've got to be joking! We are guarding the collective knowledge of the world! We have thousands of books in all languages and on all topics. We even have books in languages that no one can read anymore. There *has* to be a book in the Archives that tells us what's in our own goddamn Vault!"

Gustov almost looked amused. "If you could find it, I would be most grateful, little one."

Radu broke in. "It's been sealed since long before the time of the Great Calamity. It was only opened once in recorded history. Our only reliable records are from the time of the last King of Gusteko. During the long ago war with Lagunica, the dragon appeared and our army was crushed. In desperation, the King ordered the Vault to be opened and 'the artifact' retrieved."

"What artifact?" Anri asked.

Gustov shrugged. "Who knows? The King believed that there was a powerful artifact in the Vault. Although, I have no idea *why* he believed that or if he was right. Your ancestor was reluctant to comply as keeping the Vault secure was a sacred trust going back beyond all memory but the King was insistent and finally your ancestor ordered the Vault opened and explored. Sixty men entered. None emerged again."

Anri just stared at him.

Gustov nodded. "After waiting for three days, the Vault was once again sealed. It has remained sealed ever since. The King accused your ancestor of betrayal and had House Ithil stricken from the rolls of Gusteko."

Anri gaped at him. "Wait a second! *That's* why we lost our standing?!"

"That's why," Radu nodded.

Anri shook her head. "What the hell?! Why is that even a secret?! We didn't do *anything* wrong! Why are we always treating the cause of our fall as if it was some great shame of our family?!"

Gustov shook his head. "Few people even know about the Vault. We'd prefer to keep it that way. So we never talked about what happened."

"It's not like the fact that our punishment was unjust would have changed anyone's mind," Radu shrugged.

Anri shook her head in disbelief.

Subaru coughed. "Well, I doubt that Capella was trying this hard to break in just so she could take a look around in there," Subaru pointed out. "Capella wanted *something* out of that Vault. We'll just ask her what it was."

Anri nodded. "Good plan. Honestly, there are a number of things that I want to ask her before I decide on her punishment."

Gustov clapped his hands together. "Well, to move onto more important matters, I believe that the two of you desire to look for the solution to a problem in our library? I will assist you to the best of my ability. What is the problem?"

Subaru and Emilia looked at one another and sighed. "Emilia has been cursed," Subaru murmured. "She's been afflicted with a curse that causes everyone to forget about her."

Gustov's bushy eyebrows climbed to his hairline.

"We suspect that the Witch Cult was involved," Emilia added, looking at Subaru helplessly. "But that's really all that we know..."

Gustov frowned. "I have heard of such things," He said gravely.

"You have?!" Subaru asked excitedly.

Gustov nodded. "There are records in the Archive, albeit few and far between, of men and woman who claimed that they had been... forgotten by the world. Their own friends and family did not remember them and they claimed that these people's memories had been rewritten to exclude them. They would have simply been dismissed as lunatics except that in rare cases the person so afflicted was able to prove he knew things that he otherwise could not have known."

"Did any of them find a cure?" Subaru whispered, squeezing Emilia's hand.

Gustov stared at him, his face grave. "I am sorry. If a cure exists, I know nothing of it."

Jacob's entire body was wracked with searing pain. That was the only reason that he knew he wasn't dead.

Jacob tried to open his eyes, then realized that one of them was covered by bandages. Actually, most of his body was covered with bandages.

"Jacob?!"

Jacob blinked and his vision cleared. He was in bed back at home. His mother, father, and sister-in-law Helen were looking down at him in concern.

"How-"

"You can stumbling back here, middle of last night!" His father cut him off. "You were delirious and out of your mind. What happened to you?!"

Jacob shook his head. "I faced the devil himself," He whispered.

"Where's Christopher?!" Helen demanded.

Jacob's face twisted in pain as he remembered the sight of his little brother, withering in the flames.

Hellen's face fell and she began to weep. Jacob's mother wrapped her arms around her and they cried together.

Jacob's father sat down heavily on a chair next to his bed, looking stunned. "What... happened out there?"

Jacob shook his head. "A bunch of soldiers in the Hilde army were ordered to go south and join a House Griest army. I never really got the straight of where we were going or why. Then a few nights ago, Malcolm an Griest captured Kairei an Ithil."

His father nodded. "Good for him, I guess."

"Suppose so," Jacob said slowly. "But the other generals weren't happy. Chris..." Jacob's voice failed him as the loss of his brother hit him all over again. He fought to continue. "Chris claims that he heard the generals arguing with Prince

Malcolm about how they wanted him to send the princess away immediately. They weren't here to help him with private disputes and they didn't want to be involved but Malcolm refused."

Jacob took a deep breath. "That night the camp was set upon by mabeasts. Big ones. No idea where they came from, there weren't supposed to be any mabeasts in that area. Anyway, by the time we drove them off, we heard an alarm from the camp that the Princess was escaping. So we were all ordered to go after her.

"Prince Malcolm and the other Acolyte Knights led the charge and we ran through a field of tall grass trying to catch up. Finally, we'd brought them to bay at the end of the valley and there was no escape but..."

"But?" His father prompted.

Jacob shuddered. "The entire valley erupted into flame..."

"What?!" His father gasped.

Jacob shut his eyes tight and trembled. "It was ghastly. The entire field went up like a torch and we were in the middle of it! Father, you can't imagine the screaming. Everyone started bumping into each other, and knocking one another down, desperately trying to escape the flames. Once you fell, you got trampled by the others and even if you managed to get up, you were disoriented and had no idea which way was out and which way was deeper into the flames. Thousands of men burned to death in minutes!"

Jacob buried his face in his hands. "I managed to get out of the flames and I dragged Christopher out with me but Chris... he was badly burned."

Jacob looked down at the bandages that covered most of his body. "More badly burned than this. He... he didn't make it. He died a few minutes later."

His father's face twisted in grief.

"I stumbled my way over to the Acolyte Knights who had survived the blaze. I hoped... I don't know what I was hoping for. Some... orders, some direction, I guess," Jacob mused, uncertain if anyone in the room was even listening at this point.

"The person who rescued the princess identified himself as Subaru Natsuki," Jacob continued.

His father started. "The Butcher of Arlem?!" He whispered.

Jacob nodded slowly. "Butcher doesn't even describe it. I saw it, Dad. Subaru Natsuki just... raised his hand and the entire valley burst into flames. One of the other survivors called him 'the Fire Witch.' I'd never even imagined anything so terrifying."

"By the Gods," His father gasped.

"Subaru Natsuki used some strange black magic and stole the spirits from the Acolyte Knights. He... he brainwashed them somehow. Every other spirit in the army panicked and fled. Then he defeated the knights and took them prisoner," Jacob trailed off and shook his head. "I never imagined that monsters like this even existed..."

His father stared mournfully down at his son.

Jacob took a deep breath. "I don't really remember what happened after that. I guess I just started running and one way or another, I found my way back here..."

Crusch stormed her way toward a small room in the castle. Crusch had been summoned there by one of Montefort's lackeys and told in no uncertain terms that she had best be there immediately. Crusch's fingers twitched and she had longed to draw her sword at this presumptuous command but her fears for Felix made her behave.

She entered a simple sitting room with many comfortable chairs. Montefort, Pickett, and Zyst were already present.

"What's going on, Montefort? What happened?" Pickett was asking Montefort.

Montefort just snarled and didn't answer. Montefort saw the princesses enter the room and Crusch was startled to see rolling fury in Montefort's eyes. In all the years she'd known him she'd never seen Montefort lose control like this.

"How did you know?" Montefort demanded of Crusch.

Crusch kept her face expressionless by sheer force of will.

"How did she know *what*, Montefort?" Zyst interjected. "What is going on?!"

Montefort ignored him and his gaze remained fixated on Crusch. "I never imagined that you could be devious enough to do something like this," He hissed.

"To do what, Montefort?!" Pickett shouted. "What is happening here?!"

Montefort took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "This morning, just before we were scheduled to begin our trial for Subaru Natsuki, Crusch Karnstein walked into the council chamber and submitted *this* into evidence."

Montefort unceremoniously dropped the paper on the table in front of Pickett and Zyst. They began to read it.

Pickett looked up with a smile and a laugh. "Hah! It seems we weren't so far off after all! Subaru Natsuki really is a Witch Cultist! Amazing timing that this evidence shows up right before the trial! Truthfully, I had my doubts that we could make the charges stick as things stood!"

Montefort stared at him for a long moment. Then he closed his eyes and seemed to count to ten. "Yes, Master Pickett," Montefort said through clenched teeth. "It *is* remarkable timing. In fact some people might even go so far as to call it *unbelievable* timing."

"What's the impact?" Zyst asked sharply.

"I've just been accosted by six of my most loyal allies. They have thoroughly castigated me for this blunder."

"You?!" Pickett asked.

"Yes," Montefort said in a tight voice. "No one believed for an instant that I wasn't the architect of this contrived and unbelievable piece of evidence. They assumed that I arranged for this evidence to be fabricated to strengthen our case against Subaru Natsuki. They accused me of humiliating all of them, either by deliberate malice or by sheer incompetence. It took everything I had just to hold my faction together. Lady Crusch has sabotaged us!"

Crusch kept her face impassive, no easy feat when she desperately wanted to beg someone, anyone, to kindly explain to her what the hell was going on.

Montefort approached Crusch and got right up in her face. Crusch lifted her chin to stare into Montefort's eyes imperiously. She would not permit him to see her blink.

"Who told you?" Montefort demanded.

"Hm?" Crusch said noncommittally.

"Who tipped you off that we were planning to accuse Subaru Natsuki of witchcraft today and to suspend the royal selection? You must have had considerable advance knowledge to coordinate with Felix Argyle to fabricate and submit this evidence in multiple cities. Did you have it all along and were just waiting for the opportune time to discredit us?" Montefort paused as an idea occurred to him. "Are you *working* with Subaru Natsuki?!"

What?! Crusch thought in amazement.

"Montefort," Pickett said. "I confess that I don't understand the problem. We aren't just rigging a trial any longer. We have evidence now!"

"Evidence that *no one* will believe!" Montefort snapped back. "Testimony of a dead man that arrives just in the nick of time to provide substance to an empty case? Presenting this evidence actually makes our case seem even weaker and more desperate! That's why the other assembly members are so angry!"

Picket digested that for a moment and shrugged. "Well then, don't present the evidence! Go ahead without it!"

"We can't do that either, Willard!" Montefort hissed into Crusch's face through clenched teeth. "Too many people know about it! If we *don't* present it, we just confirm to everyone that this evidence is a fraud that we couldn't pass off as real!"

Montefort stormed away with a scowl. He seized a glass of wine off the table and quickly drained it. "Crusch has been planning this all along. Grandfather always taught me the best way to undermine someone's political ambitions was to join their faction but to do so badly," Montefort shook his head angrily. "I could never understand why Crusch was acting so incompetently toward Subaru Natsuki. The blundering, unsupported accusations, the appeals for investigations, and all the rest. She gave us our opening to spring a trap on Subaru Natsuki and as soon as we took the bait, she *sabotaged* us and made our attack look so unbelievably incompetent that no one in the kingdom will believe us!"

Montefort raised his wineglass to Crusch in salute but his eyes were wild with fury. "Truly masterful gameplay, Lady Crusch," Montefort growled. "Your father would be proud," Montefort drained his glass and then threw it against a nearby wall where the delicate wineglass shattered.

Zyst and Pickett shared a worried look as Montefort stormed around the room swearing.

Montefort finally shook his head and turned back to Crusch. "I *will* find whoever told you about our plans, Crusch," He growled. "I do not tolerate traitors in my faction. And rest assured that I will be watching you *very* closely from here on out. Set one toe out of line and I promise you, Felix will lose a foot!"

Crusch was quite literally speechless.

This is absurd! I didn't plan any of this! Montefort's analysis commits a cardinal sin of rational thinking: He has completely dismissed the existence of coincidence, happenstance, and sheer dumb luck. He's misinterpreting all of my recent actions so that a string of complete blunders is now reconstructed as absolute strategic brilliance!

Still for me, this is great good fortune. Montefort's plan is in shambles. His suffocating web is unraveling. He now seems poised to hunt through his own faction for a nonexistent betrayer which will only alienate his allies further.

There will be an opening for me! I just need to find it!

"If there is nothing else, gentlemen," Crusch said calmly. "I have a few matters to attend to."

Montefort waved dismissively. "Just don't forget to cast your vote."

Feir sat up in the balcony shaking his head and trying to process what was going on. "I don't understand any of this!"

"Try to keep up, Feir!" Georg complained. "As of last week, Subaru Natsuki's coronation became nothing short of inevitable. That's caused all of the major power brokers in the kingdom to wake up and realize that they consider his kingship to be utterly unacceptable."

"But why? His accomplishments are already staggering! Surely he would make a worthy king."

"The problem is *what* he wants to do," Georg grumbled. "He's become a threat to the established interests in the kingdom: social, economic, *and* political. Major players in the other three factions have joined forces to eliminate him. They plan to declare him a Witch. Moreover, the word is that the council plans to suspend or end the royal selection."

Feir stared at Georg. "No one has been formally declared a Witch in centuries! To be killed on sight without trial? To decree that anyone who offers him aid or assistance is also a criminal? And on what charge? And now they mean to cancel the royal selection, ordained by the Holy Dragon Tablet? This is madness! They can not do this!"

Georg gave his friend an impatient look. "Are you drunk, Feir? You may be an aged, enfeebled, and quite possibly alcoholic man-whore, but you still have one of the sharpest political minds in the kingdom! I should not need to explain these things to you!"

"What are you saying?" Feir said with some offense.

"Remember your father's first rule of politics," Georg grumbled.

Feir looked somber. "'The strong do as they wish and the weak suffer as they must.'"

"In this case, the strong were willing to tolerate the election, until it became apparent that the people were going to make the 'wrong' choice. Now the gloves are coming off."

"What did I hear about riots in the streets last night?" Feir asked.

"A very peaceful demonstration, protesting the sages' council's intentions," Georg muttered quietly, "Regrettably, it was a protest in favor of the *wrong* candidate. They were all to be arrested on charges of sedition but a radical appeared on the scene with an explosive device, either a Witch Cultist or a member of the Demi-Human Alliance depending on which story you believe. The protesters all scattered before they could be arrest and the radical killed several guards."

"What does that mean? Was the radical here to help the Subaru faction escape or to discredit them?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

"Your honors," Felt said struggling for patience as she spoke to the enormous royal assembly as well as the attendant sages' council who all looked down accusingly at her. Garfiel stood nearby with the twins but they hadn't been asked any questions yet. "I must protest! My Lord Subaru is not here to offer testimony in his own defense! There has been no time to locate him or even give him the chance to appear!"

"Your lord is a traitor!" Aghart snapped. "There are numerous witnesses who have provided testimony that he is willingly in the company of a Witch and has attacked innocent people!"

"Where *are* these witnesses?! Why have we not heard from them?" Felt demanded. "This council cites evidence that it will not present in open court! Moreover, there is absolutely no proof that Subaru Natsuki is not enchanted to obey her! There is a long history of witches-"

"Supposition," Choi dismissed. "Subaru Natsuki's motivation for associating with this witch does not concern this council. For whatever reason he has become a clear and present danger to the nation and indeed the world by aiding and abetting the Witch of Envy. He must be killed on sight."

"Excuse me! This is going unreasonably fast!" Dore protested. "This 'trial,' and I use that term very loosely, which will set a man completely outside the bounds of the law and condemn him to death is taking less time than some breaking and entering cases that I have overseen!"

"Perhaps you should run your trials more efficiently," Aghart shrugged.

"Precedent is very clear!" Byrd interjected. "We may not declare any man branded with the title of Witch *in absentia* until he has refused our summons to speak in his own defense on *three* separate occasions! We have not summoned Subaru Natsuki to appear before us a single time!"

"Byrd, we are discussing the resolution of a man who is an established associator of Witches and likely a Witch Cultist himself," Choi said in a bored voice.

"Supposition!" Byrd threw back at him. "What evidence have we that either of those things are true? He has been seen traveling with a silver haired half-elf. That is *all*! Have we not learned from the Witch Hunts of yesteryear not to

immediately assume that anyone meeting that description is a witch? And why would we assume that Subaru Natsuki is a Witch Cultist? He has killed more high ranking Witch Cultists in the past month than the entire nation has in the past hundred years!"

"And that does not strike you as suspicious?" Aghart asked.

"No, it does not strike me as suspicious! Why would it? The only reason I can see that one *would* find it suspicious is if they had already formed that opinion and were looking to justify it!"

"Are you implying that I'm not being impartial in this matter?" Aghart demanded.

"No, I didn't mean to imply such, Aghart. I meant to say it flat out!" Byrd shot back.

"Enough," McMahon said gaveling for order. "I think we have heard everything we need to hear. It's time to vote."

"The triumvirate is making their move openly," Georg explained.

"The triumvirate?! They don't do that!"

"They're scared," Georg said quietly, glancing around to make sure that they weren't overheard. "Montefort is terrified about the political upheaval of the demi-humans rising again, especially if they were to make common cause with the human peasantry. If that alliance goes into effect, the power of the nobility will be broken and he knows it."

Feir shook his head. "It was madness when King Zakariel allowed the Monteforts to keep the title of Grand Duke after the King's own children were grown. Montefort's great-grandfather was no longer royalty nor in the line for the throne then! Anyone could have seen the power play in the making!"

"We certainly did at least. Nor do I think that King Gionis's father was nearly as sick as we were told when he died. My nephew-" Georg cut himself off as a young nobleman walked by and only continued talking in a quiet voice once he was safely out of earshot. "My nephew assures me that he was summoned to an emergency meeting of the Mages' Circle. I have only the slightest idea of what Subaru Natsuki's machines do but apparently Zyst thinks that it will negate his monopoly on sorcery in the kingdom. He's worried that instead of hiring powerful, fully trained mages to perform enchantments at great cost, the machines could do similar jobs at the price of a cheap magic crystal."

"I don't follow."

Georg thought for a moment, "Feir, how much gold do you spend on water for your mansion every year? How much to re-enchant those pipes every year to bring fresh water in, heat it, and carry waste water out."

"A few hundred gold, I suppose."

Georg nodded. "My nephew assures me that these machines could easily do the same job. You might spend a few hundred gold once and then need to replace or charge the magic crystals every year. An unschooled peasant hedge mage could do that task for a few silver pieces a year."

"Allowing hedge mages to compete with the educated and certified Circle mages," Feir said. "I understand now. This would cripple the power and influence of the Mages' Circle as they would no longer have easy ways to make money. They'd probably start struggling to find recruits as fewer mages would see the value in long years of study for no financial return. This would also shift the power of mages from the nobility to the lower classes. No wonder Zyst is worried. What about Willard Picket?"

Georg shrugged. "He's easy to understand. He's worried that Subaru's plan to empty the slums will cut into his profits. Right now the dust rats in the slums fight over the chance to do hard labor for a copper a day. If the slums empty, or even if the population just falls to the point where there's not enough dust rats for all the jobs, the price of labor will go up and Willard's profits will go down."

"Charming fellow," Feir commented sarcastically.

"I don't find any of these three charming," Georg muttered. "Unfortunately, they currently have all the power in the kingdom and they won't let it go without a fight."

"But to declare someone a Witch without any evidence at all? This is unheard of! Surely the sages' council will get involved."

"Aghart is Montefort's uncle as well as a virulent xenophobe who hates demi-humans on principle so we know which way he'll vote," Georg grumbled. "I've heard rumors that Choi will join them as well. The man sees red whenever the Witch Cult is mentioned. Ever since the cultists killed his oldest son, Choi hasn't required much more than an accusation to start building bonfires under people. Dore is a kindly old man and he'll never vote to convict without absolute proof so he's a 'no.' Byrd is a fanatical stickler for the letter of the law and he must be livid about all the liberties they are taking with it, so he'll vote against."

"Then it all come down to McMahon. But he'll surely vote no, will he not? The man is a staunch traditionalist! He loves nothing so much as tradition and precedent!"

"Yes, he does. He loves his seat on the sages' council," Georg said. "Montefort has the votes in the royal council to have him replaced and McMahon knows it. He either plays ball or he'll be kicked off of the sages' council and they'll install someone more compliant."

"This is a remarkable type of political intrigue," Feir admitted. "I surprise myself that I am not more excited."

"It's because you're too experienced, my friend. We've both read the history books. When political factions like this form, the rule book gets thrown out the window. The only thing that matters is power. The only question you're asked at trial is 'who are you loyal to' and the wrong answer means that you disappear permanently," Georg said.

"Georg, perhaps this is an unwise place for us to be right now," Feir commented.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Georg agreed.

"Then again," Feir mused. "Our lives *are* nearly over in any case. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing to go out with a bit of excitement."

"You drive me crazy, Feir," Georg moaned. "Although you probably do have a point."

Crusch's nails dug into her palm hard enough to draw blood. She heard the vote being called. There hadn't been a single 'nay' vote yet. She briefly wondered if everyone had fallen in with Montefort willingly or if he had extorted and blackmailed more of the assembly. She supposed it didn't really matter.

Crusch almost wished that this roll call would go by faster. She was sitting here waiting to buy Felix's life with her integrity, her honor, and her pride. The longer this went on the more disgusted with herself she became.

She could stop this. She could stand up and be that lone dissenting vote. She might even become a rallying point for the disaffected members hostile to Montefort's agenda to gather around. His power wasn't as absolute as he implied. He could still be taken down.

She was a Duke. She was a soldier of Lagunica. She had sworn an oath to defend her nation against all threats, foreign and domestic. Today she could redeem that oath.

All that it would cost her was Felix: Her knight, her childhood friend, her closest confidant, and her cherished companion.

"Duke Crusch Karnstein!" McMahon called.

Crusch jumped up in her seat. Her eyes darted every which way like a trapped animal and then focused on Montefort's annoyed but still smug face.

"...Aye," She whispered in a barely audible voice.

The roll call continued.

Father. Forgive me...

Today I have truly proved unworthy to be your daughter or to bear the Karnstein name...

"The royal assembly motion is passed," McMahon declared. "By acclimation, Subaru Natsuki is stripped of all rights and will be hunted down like a rabid animal."

"I move to set aside the verdict!" Dore proclaimed. "This has been nothing but a mockery of procedure and justice!"

"I agree!" Byrd shouted.

"We are not here to second guess the verdict of the royal council," Aghart said in a bored voice. "The council has made it's decision. Let it stand."

"I second that," Choi said.

McMahon looked uncomfortable, "Then the final decision comes down to me."

McMahon took a deep breath. The entire packed room focused on him.

"Taking all statements into consideration, I do not find sufficient deviation from protocol to set aside the royal council's decision. The Mark of the Witch stands."

He gaveled.

Felt stood numbly in the council chamber.

"By unanimous vote, Subaru Natsuki is branded with the Mark of the Witch," McMahon proclaimed. "He will be killed on sight and anyone who offers him any form of aid or shelter is a criminal in the eyes of both men and gods. His faction is disbanded and this court will send word to all people throughout the world that his death is mandated as an enemy of humanity."

Felt's pride alone held back her tears as the man she admired more than anyone else she had ever met was marked as a wild animal to be put down.

"Sir Reinhard will be instructed to hunt down Subaru Natsuki's witch and finish her. He is a knight of the kingdom and subject to our authority. This is an order by the royal assembly," McMahon said firmly.

"How exactly is Reinhard supposed to do that?" Felt asked in a dead voice. "He can't leave the country, remember? Or do you really think that Subaru Natsuki is dumb enough to come back here when he knows that everyone is looking to kill him?"

"Impudent!" Aghart cried out.

"But she does make a good point," McMahon said in a composed voice. "Our evidence suggests that Subaru Natsuki is currently in Gusteko."

"The Hierocracy will not tolerate Reinhard van Astrea in their territory," Dore pointed out.

"They will when they're informed that the Witch of Envy is free!" Choi said.

"You've already told them that," Byrd sighed. "They thought that we were either liars or insane!"

"That is neither here nor there," McMahon said gaveling.

"Miss Rem and Miss Ram," McMahon began, "You are ordered to return to your master's manor to await his return. Inform him that this august body has questions for him."

The twins didn't move so a few knights began to push them along and they were herded out of the court room.

Felt stared at the floor. *They're isolating me and the fleabag. I know what that means.*

"The girl known as 'Felt' and the demi-human known as 'Garfiel,'" McMahon continued. "Are hereby placed under arrest."

"On what charge?!" Garfiel demanded.

Felt just looked up at the council, her eyes were hard and she refused to let them see her blink.

"Suspicion of acting contrary to the kingdom's interests. Of aiding and abetting an enemy of the kingdom. Of coordinating with and supplying the dangerous radicals that detonated an explosive device during the riot last night," Aghart said smugly as knights approached to bind and chain them.

"Garf, don't!" Felt snapped as Garfiel got ready to fight. "That's just what they want! Don't give them an excuse to kill you! It's you against a hundred knights and not even you can take those kind of odds."

Garfiel bared his teeth as the knights clapped heavy iron manacles on both him and Felt.

"You and these spirits," McMahon added, gesturing toward the apathetic spirits who had yet to say a word, "Shall be taken to Torgon Tower until this investigation is complete."

McMahon gaveled. "We are adjourned."

"Until the investigation is complete?" Garfiel laughed bitterly as the knights roughly herded the pair out of the court room. "How long do you think that will take, shrimp?"

"I don't know, fleabag," Felt replied in a dead voice as they were marched away, "It all depends on when they've scheduled our 'accident.'"

Before she left the courtroom, Felt turned around and looked Crusch square in the eye, the woman famed for her integrity who had voted to strip Felt's friend of all rights without any real evidence even being presented.

Crusch met her gaze briefly but she could only look down in shame.

Crusch sat in her seat on the assembly floor feeling numb, her head bowed.

"Your excellencies!" A functionary burst into the room accompanied by a man in a knight's uniform with his hood pulled up.

McMahon looked down at her sternly. "What is it this time?!" He snapped.

"A thousand apologies, your excellencies, but I thought that this was an emergency," The functionary said in a small voice, looking up at the angry sages. "This man is an eye witness to a battle involving the Gusteko army!"

Crusch spun around. *Whatever else is happening right now, this is of dire importance. How many villages and towns were razed? How much damage was done in the north? Is the city of Ganaks even worth retaking?*

Priscilla was sulking in a balcony overlooking the council chamber. Anastasia was sitting next to her, watching the proceedings with a numb expression.

The knight drew back his hood.

Anastasia's eyes widened. "Julius!" She cried out like a song of delight.

Priscilla's head snapped up in shock.

Crusch's eyes narrowed and she quickly looked at Montefort who appeared increasingly annoyed.

McMahon cleared his throat. "Sir Julius Juukulius," he began. "All of Lagunica thanks you for your courage in attempting to get as many people out of Ganaks as possible. How bad were our loses?"

"There's no point in delving into this right now!" Aghart objected. "This council was convened to-"

"I want to hear this!" Lord Vatu cried out from his chair in the assembly. "This matter concerns my friends and neighbors! I call upon Sir Julius Juukulius to give this assembly a full report!"

"I second the motion!" Another noble shouted.

"Hear, hear!" Called a third.

McMahon thought for a moment and seemed to decide not to call for a full vote. "Sir Julius, please report to this assembly what you observed."

Julius's face was set. "I bring joyous tiding to uplift the hearts of all Lagunicans," Julius pronounced in a great voice. "Ganaks still stands and the enemy army has been destroyed without it ever crossing the border! Victory was ours!"

The room broke out in a excited babbling.

McMahon gaveled for order until the room quieted down.

"Sir Julius," McMahon continued. "This is truly wondrous news. How was this accomplished?"

"Some days ago, Sir Felix, Aldebaran, and I went to the Gusteko village of Iruk to ascertain whether or not Gusteko's accusations against Subaru Natsuki had substance," Julius began. "We discovered them to be complete fabrications. We then traveled to Ganaks to deliver our report and to rest. The following night, I encountered Subaru Natsuki in the city of Ganaks by complete chance. I challenged Subaru Natsuki to a duel and... was promptly bested," Julius sighed.

The room murmured.

"Bested?" Choi asked in surprise. "Sir Julius, you are one of the finest duelists in the kingdom. This is in addition to your considerable magical power as a spirit arts user!"

Julius continued in a steady voice. "Subaru Natsuki used his power to separate me from my spirits and to deny me their magic. Although he might have turned their power against me, instead he choose to fight me as a man of honor in a duel. I was helpless against Subaru Natsuki and he disarmed me handily without spilling a drop of my blood. When I acknowledged my defeat, he returned my spirits to me. The Ganaks garrison pursed Subaru Natsuki but he managed to escape.

"I returned to the garrison and was informed of the army approaching Ganaks. General Brendig dispatched me to the north with a detachment of his own men telling me to delay the army by any means necessary. During this journey north, I was betrayed and attacked by Brendig's men."

"What? Why?" Dore asked in shock.

"I can not say for certain, your excellency," Julius's voice implying that he *could* say but not under oath. "However, these men drew weapons on me from behind and would have slain me except that I was rescued by Princess Kairei of Siros who intervened in this assassination to save my life at great personal risk to herself."

There was a murmur through the audience chamber.

"The Princess and I fled through the forest. Princess Kairei and I were ultimately surrounded by Sanshi soldiers and the princess surrendered herself to save my life. The Sanshi captain vowed that my life would be spared. He technically kept his word but I was seized and taken prisoner as well," Julius growled.

Julius shook his head. "I was trapped and rendered helpless by the Gusteko army but Subaru Natsuki and the Lady Emilia came searching for the Princess and rescued me as well."

"Rescued you?!" Aghart objected.

"Sir Julius," Lord Vatu called from the floor. "Please explain more. What happened to the enemy army?"

"Subaru Natsuki devised a plan to defeat this army," Julius said. His voice growing awed in spite of himself. "He managed to obliterate an army ten thousand strong with a force of fifty men!"

The room was dead silent.

Crusch's jaw dropped.

"Subaru Natsuki and the Lady Emilia performed a daring night raid on the army camp and recovered the princess and myself. The army was in fast pursuit of us but we led them through an enormous field of tall grass that Subaru Natsuki's men had carefully doused in sesame seed oil. When the army was in the grass, Subaru Natsuki ordered the field set ablaze by flaming arrows. The army burned to death in minutes."

Dore looked horrified. "What kind of monster is he?!" He whispered.

"Only a witch would do something so cruel!" Choi shouted. "This was unquestionably an act of naked sadism!"

Julius looked straight at him. "I traveled with Subaru Natsuki and Miss Emilia. I came to know them both. I confess, I have small liking for Subaru Natsuki, a man that I found to be reckless in the extreme and lacking in forethought, guided by overweening pride and a courage that is simply too foolish to be heroic. I discovered him to be fearless in battle and stern when needs must. Yet as a knight bound to speak the truth, I can not call him sadistic or purposefully cruel and with my own eyes, I saw him weep for his slaughtered foes.

"Subaru Natsuki, Lady Emilia, and I then faced three of the Acolyte Knights in single combat and, using Subaru Natsuki's strange powers, we prevailed. The princess was rescued and the army was destroyed! Subaru Natsuki himself engaged Malcolm an Griest in combat and captured him. He and the others are now prisoners in Siros."

The council chamber began to murmur.

Everyone sounds impressed by that, Crusch thought.

Malcolm an Griest has been stirring up trouble along the border for years. The man was completely outside the Hierocracy's control. Like it or not, this was a staggering victory for Subaru Natsuki. Although right now, I'm not sure if that even matters.

"How was this accomplished?" Vatu asked in wonder.

"Subaru Natsuki has a strange power. He claims that the world itself has ceded him full agency over its magic. He stole away the spirits that had been bonded to the three Acolyte Knights and thus were we able to defeat them. Subaru Natsuki later planned to return their spirits to them once they were safely contained."

Aghart's eyes bulged. "Why would he do that?! Is the man a fool?"

"He restored Malcolm an Griest's spirits to him because, in my judgment, Subaru Natsuki is a kind man at heart, minister," Julius replied calmly. His eyes swept over the assembled crowd until he had located Beatrice. She stood under guard near the edge of the room, cradling Puck in her arms. "He told me that he too knew what it meant to feel the special connection that comes from the gentle warmth of a loving spirit. He says that to be separated from his partners was the most grievous wound of his life and that his heart is desolate without them."

Beatrice's eyes filled with tears and she held Puck closer.

Julius turned back to the council. "He chooses not to inflict that same wound on any other person, not even an enemy. I... respect him greatly for such kindness."

The assembly members started to talk quickly to one another.

Crusch could only shake her head. *Subaru Natsuki has the luck of the devil. Then again, considering the possibility that he may very well be one, perhaps that's not surprising.*

She looked at Montefort whose normally placid face was twisted in a rare scowl. Several other council members were glaring at Montefort.

Crusch carefully hid a smirk. *Montefort has completely bungled this and he knows it. The evidence that I submitted arriving in so timely a fashion to this mockery of a trial was one thing, and that strained his grip on most of the men in his faction, but Subaru acting heroically to rescue Julius and the Princess, not to mention defeating an enemy army singlehandedly, has caused them all to look like the vicious schemers that Felt was accusing them of being. It undercuts their entire argument and throws oil on the fire. The peasantry and demi-humans who support Subaru Natsuki will be nothing short of incensed when word gets out. The odds of violent riots or even a revolt being touched off just skyrocketed. With all of this going on, Montefort will struggle to keep his faction together.*

And that gives me a chance. I thought that I was trapped until Montefort could make me his brood sow but now that his web is becoming unraveled, I have an opening. All I need to do is find and rescue Felix and then Montefort's head will be mine!

McMahon finally quieted the room. "Is there anything else, Sir Julius?"

Julius shook his head. "Princess Kairei sent with me missives expressing her gratitude to the people of Lagunica for her timely rescue," Julius said, hanging McMahon a sealed envelope. "She also extends her hopes for a new era of peace and cooperation with her southern neighbors now that House Griest has been crippled. The only other thing left to say is that I also had the good fortune to get to know the half-elf, Miss Emilia, that Subaru Natsuki travels with. I found her to be a compassionate and brave woman. I am confident that any accusation directed at her of nefarious behavior is woefully inaccurate."

The room broke into an excited babble.

Crusch raised an eyebrow. *Most of what I know about Julius comes from Felix but clearly the man has nerves of steel. He's directly telling the sages' council and the royal assembly that they are flat out wrong. They will strike out at him for this. I doubt that Montefort will try to kill him again. Now that he's revealed in a public setting that he's been targeted, another assassination would be too risky. But there are other ways to punish a man.*

McMahon sighed. "Where is Subaru Natsuki now?"

"Princess Kairei is hosting Subaru Natsuki and Lady Emilia as honored guests," Julius replied. "She claims them as close friends and has asked them to remain by her side as her closest advisers. I'm also aware that Subaru Natsuki and Lady Emilia remain on a quest to lift the curse on the Lady Emilia that has removed her from all memories. I have no idea where this will lead them but I expect that Subaru Natsuki and Lady Emilia will be in Siros for the foreseeable future where they are both held in honor."

The assembly began to murmur amongst themselves.

"It appears clear to me that Gusteko is becoming a threat to Lagunica," Choi grumbled. "First they threaten us with an army, now they are fostering witches in violation of all international law!"

"Agreed," Aghart grumbled. "A punitive mission should be launched immediately to Siros. If nothing else, it would establish how seriously Lagunica takes the Witchcraft performed by Subaru Natsuki. With luck, we can blame the entire fiasco on Siros and Princess Kairei."

Crusch was on her feet instantly. "Excellencies! You can not attack Gusteko!"

McMahon gaveled. "You are out of order, Lady Crusch!" He said sternly.

Crusch did not return to her seat. "Excellencies, our armies are already stretched to the breaking point!" She said through clenched teeth. "They're like a pat of butter spread across an entire loaf of bread! There is no way to attack Gusteko without simply *begging* Vollachia to take advantage!"

"No one is talking about attacking, Gusteko, Lady Crusch," Choi reassured her. "Just Siros. It's a small, isolated province held in contempt by most of Gusteko. This isn't the other Great Houses fight. They won't interfere."

"How optimistic of you!" Byrd said incredulously. "Whether the other Houses *like* Ithil or not is beside the point. If Lagunica marches north, every House in Gusteko will join forces to protect their *own* interests. Gusteko will not look the other way while we bite off a large chunk of their southern territory! Even Kararagi and Vollachia might become involved if they fear that we're developing territorial ambitions!"

"Gusteko lacks a strong army, especially if so many fell in battle against Ithil. We should manage without much difficulty," Aghart said dismissively.

Crusch stared at the 'wise men' incredulously, too stunned to even be able to respond.

"Excellencies!" Julius burst out. "I protest! Princess Kairei is attempting to establish friendly ties with our nation! We should do all we can to encourage this!"

"Those who foster and companion with witches do not earn the friendship of the Dragon Kingdom," Choi said witheringly. "Much like *yourself*."

Julius looked stunned, then his expression became furious.

Out of the corner of her eye, Crusch saw Montefort gesture at her and she reluctantly retook her seat.

McMahon quickly gaveled. "Enough. Our response to Ithil will be discussed separately. This council is closed. Take the remaining prisoners away."

Julius watched as the spirits were forcefully removed from the chamber.

Julius heard running and turned around only for Anastasia to throw her arms around him.

Julius started. "My lady!" He said in surprise.

"I thought that you were dead!" Anastasia wept into his chest.

Julius's face contorted in sympathy and he awkwardly patted her back. "I will never abandon you, my Lady. Not even if I have to fight my way back to you from the gates of death itself," He promised.

"Julius!" A voice shouted.

Anastasia and Julius looked up to see Heikel standing there with a scowl on his face. "I have a new assignment for you," The guard captain grumbled.

"He *just* got back!" Anastasia protested.

"Duty calls," Heikel spat. "Since we can't trust him to do his job properly, not even to avoid falling for a witch's lies, he's been assigned to escort the prison caravan to Torgon Tower that departs this afternoon."

"Listen to me, Heikel," Anastasia hissed before Julius could respond. "Julius is *my* knight and I require his services. The caravan won't leave for several hours. I intend to make certain that Julius gets a good meal into him before he departs. Understand?!"

Heikel scowled at Anastasia but the purple haired merchant didn't budge. Finally Heikel stepped back. "Fine. Let the knight *service* his lady," Heikel said with a blunt innuendo.

Julius clenched his fists but Anastasia held him back.

Heikel curled his lip. "Just make sure that you're there when the caravan departs. And don't expect to be back any time soon. You can watch the cat girl for your lady," He sneered as he walked away.

"Cat girl?" Julius murmured.

Anastasia looked up at Julius with misery written across her face.

"Julius," She murmured. "We have a lot to talk about and none of it is good."

Fein and a group of six guards dragged Garfiel and Felt through town.

"Where is Torgon Tower, anyway?" Garfiel growled.

"Don't worry about it, fleabag. We're not going there," Felt muttered.

"Huh?"

"I figured it out when they took us away without the spirits," Felt said as the men dragged them into a dead-end alley.

"Ah, always the clever one, Felt," Fein said, drawing his sword. "I will miss the opportunity to play with you a little but orders are orders," He shrugged.

"Yes, they are," A clipped voice said. "And I order you to let them go."

Fein looked behind him and saw Rem and Ram standing at the mouth of the alleyway. Rem had her morning star.

Fein gave them a dirty look. "I've got no quarrel with either of you. Get the hell out of here and forget what you saw."

"Sister, I think that this man has the wrong idea about us," Rem said impassively.

"Clearly," Ram agreed. "He is in dire need of correction."

Fein scowled. "Listen-" His words choked off as Rem leaped toward him almost too fast to see. She swung her mace and the shattered ruins of Fein's head went flying.

The two guards holding Garfiel gasped and moved to attack Rem. Garfiel's hands were bound but he managed to tackle those guards, slamming them hard into the stone wall with an impact that crushed skulls.

One of the guards tried to grab Felt but Ram gestured and a blade formed of wind magic sliced his hand off at the wrist.

Rem's next swing of her mace broke that man's head and a final swing crushed the last guard's chest.

Rem quickly stooped down and found a large ring of keys on Fein's headless body. "You see, Garf? *This* is what I meant about killing people in private," Rem said matter-of-fact.

"Good to know," Garfiel answered with a smirk as Rem began trying the keys on Felt's manacles, one by one.

"That one," Felt pointed at a key. She spoke dispassionately.

Rem obeyed and quickly unlocked Felt and Garfiel.

"Put these on," Ram ordered as she tossed two brown hooded robes at them. "We have a carriage waiting but we must leave now! It won't take them long to figure out what has happened."

Ram ran out of the alley followed by Garfiel.

Felt pulled the robe over her head. When she could see again, she noticed Rem standing there, fidgeting and biting her lip. "Miss Felt, I..."

"We'll sort all this out later, Rem," Felt sighed. "Come on, let's go!"

The two raced out of the alley.

The spirits found themselves in a wagon that was like a cage on wheels. It was ludicrously tiny, perhaps a transport made for small animals. Beatrice's wrist was tied to the wall with a long chain. Puck was unchained. No one was working very hard to keep them in one place, with the Evil Sealing Stone bracelets on their arms, Puck and Beatrice were no more dangerous than any other child and house cat.

Beatrice and Puck voiced no objections and passively went wherever they were led. The two sat in this tiny cage on wheels, cuddling together in abject misery.

Some time later, the guards returned to their cage and brought in a new prisoner. This one they chained up more properly although Beatrice barely paid them any notice.

The guards left without a word.

"Hey. Is that you, Beatrice?"

Beatrice blinked and looked up from Puck who was cradled in her lap.

Beatrice stared at the new prisoner and her face filled with dismay.

"Hey! It is you!" Mimi Pearlbaton said cheerfully. The tiny cat demi-human was chained on the other side of the cage. She had orange hair and wore a white robe. "It's great to see that Mimi will have someone to play with on this trip."

"Betty, do you know this person?" Puck asked in confusion.

Beatrice looked pained but finally nodded.

The cat girl looked unrealistically cheerful, despite their situation. "Hey, Beatrice? Mimi guesses that they put these dumb magic controlling bracelets on you too. Any suggestions on how we're going to bust out of here? You're the super-powered one, right?" Mimi asked. "We need to get out soon so fill Mimi in on the plan, please. This seat isn't very comfortable."

Puck looked thunderstruck and he turned to Beatrice, mutely asking for an explanation.

Beatrice face-palmed. "What did Betty ever do to deserve this, in fact?!"

Felt, Rem, and Garfiel lay on their bellies on a hill overlooking the road.

Ram remained with the carriage that was hidden nearby.

Garfiel slammed his fists together. "Alright," Garfiel said, pumping himself up. "No way we let these fuckers keep the Little Bit, no fucking way!"

"Shut up, fleabag," Felt muttered. "First, we need to see what we're up against."

The prison caravan slowly came into sight. It was twelve cages on wheels drawn by horses and one much smaller cage pulled by a pony.

"That must be where Master Puck and Miss Beatrice are," Rem murmured.

Felt was busy counting heads. "Gods. They've got twenty prison guards walking along the caravan, and twelve royal guards. Royal guards don't usually escort prison transports!"

Garfiel snorted. "There's only about thirty of them. We can handle this."

Felt stared at him. "*Only?!*" Felt whispered incredulously.

"Come on, shrimp, you've got me and Rem!" Garfiel asserted. "We'll just take them by surprise and knock them sprawling. We don't even have to kill them! Shrimp, you can run over and pick the lock on that cage and get the spirits out of there and then we all just bail. It's barely a fight, we just need to keep them busy for a bit."

Felt buried her face in her hands.

"There there, Miss Felt," Rem patted her shoulder.

"Come on, these guys can't be all that much tougher than the soldiers I sparred with back at Crusch's camp. I bet I could take a dozen of them easy!"

"Garf!" Felt snapped. "Those are twelve royal guards down there. That's a tougher proposition than taking on a crew of farm boys in uniform, and you and Rem aren't invulnerable!"

"It's worse than that, Miss Felt," Rem murmured. "That one with the purple hair is Julius Juukulius. Anastasia Hoshen's personal knight and one of the best swordsmen in the country."

"We can do this!" Garfiel asserted. "Let's hurry up and grab Ram! I don't know why she's still sitting with the carriage anyway."

Felt sighed. "Ram is waiting for us in the carriage because... she was kind enough to let us figure out the reality for ourselves..."

Garfiel turned to Felt. "Then what's the plan?! We aren't really going to just leave them here, are we?"

Felt didn't answer.

Garfiel looked horrified. "Are we?!" He whispered plaintively.

Felt sighed. "Garf, if we try to take on this crew, we're going to die. All we've got is you and Rem and maybe Ram if she feels like it. Even all together, there's no chance."

"Then what are we going to do?!"

Felt took a deep breath. "We need to find Reinhard. The royal assembly is trying to keep us all separated. We need to start undoing that."

"Hey, shrimp, I'm totally fine with tracking down your boyfriend-" Garfiel said.

"My *what?!'*" Felt snapped with bared teeth.

"-But how does that help us get the spirits out? Reinhard won't help us perform a jailbreak, or even *let* us do one."

"I don't know, Garf!" Felt said in a moan that felt as raw as a scream. She planted her face in the dirt. "Do you want me to spell it out for you?! I-don't-know! I have no idea what the fuck to do next! I am hopelessly out of my depth here! The entire world has crumbled around me and I have no idea how to put it back together again! We're going to go and find Reinhard because that will ensure that the rest of us stay safe. If we stay split up, they'll just keep picking us off one by one!"

Felt got to her feet and stomped back to the carriage with her head hung in shame.

Rem gave Garfiel a sympathetic glance and then followed Felt.

Garfiel sat there for a few moments longer, watching the tiny cage roll by him. He had tears in his eyes when he got up.

For the past few days, Beatrice had been thinking that life couldn't possibly get any worse but as usual, her calculations did not factor in Mimi Pearlbaton.

"Do you guys want to play a game?" Mimi asked.

"What game can we play when we're all chained up, I suppose?" Beatrice asked dully.

"Mimi isn't sure... 'I spy?'"

"Betty doesn't feel much like playing right now, in fact," Beatrice muttered.

"Come on! We have to keep our spirits up until we come up with a way to bust out of here," Mimi replied.

"I really respect how confident you are that we can escape, Mimi," Puck muttered.

Mimi's eyes widened. "Wow! Are you a talking cat?"

"Didn't you hear him talk before, in fact?" Beatrice asked.

"That's so cool! Can you use your 'talking cat' powers to break us out of here?" She asked excitedly.

Puck stared at her. "If I could do that, don't you think that I would have already done it?" He sighed.

Mimi shrugged. "Mimi doesn't know. Mimi thought maybe you were waiting for someone to ask. Maybe magic talking cats can only use their powers when people ask them to."

Both spirits groaned in unison.

A guard walking beside the cage gave a low chuckle. "Damn! Look at these cute little dollies!"

"I'm looking!" Another snickered.

"Oh darling, we are going to have *so* much fun when we get to Torgon Tower. We can play dress up and everything," The first leered at Beatrice.

Beatrice resolutely turned her back to him.

"This one isn't half bad either," The other said pointing at Mimi.

"Gross, Earl!" The first said in disgust. "You're into demi-humans now?"

"Hey! I'll try anything once. Yours isn't human either, you know!"

"Mimi is sorry to disappoint you but we will not be playing," Mimi said pleasantly. "Mimi knows that she's adorable but she actually does have standards."

The guards looked at one another in annoyance. "Maybe we need to declaw this kitten."

"Yeah might save us a lot of trouble in the long term."

"When we get to Torgon Tower, I'll get my pliers and we-" His words were choked off.

Beatrice turned around and saw Julius Juukulius standing behind the guards. His sword blade had been laid lightly against the guard's shoulder. "Aren't you on watch?" He asked the guard mildly.

"Y- Yes, sir!"

"Then perhaps you should return to that duty," Julius said.

The two soldiers saluted and rushed off.

Julius sheathed his sword and walked beside the cage for a moment. "Are you alright?" He asked Mimi.

"Yeah, Mimi's fine. It's just something that you learn to deal with when you look as cute as Mimi does," Mimi shrugged. "Mimi's glad that you're here with us, Julius."

Julius nodded. "I expect this to be extremely unpleasant for all of us. I loathe the fact that I'm far away from Lady Anastasia and unable to protect her but I am relieved that you three are not completely vulnerable." He glanced at Beatrice. "Miss Beatrice," He said.

She looked up at him.

"I am well aware that you and Master Puck have committed no crime. And... as little as I like to admit it, I owe Subaru Natsuki my life. If I find any way to ensure your safety by my life or death, I shall do so. To the best of my ability I will attempt to ensure that your tenure as prisoners is as non-detestable as possible."

Puck frowned for a moment. "Well... thanks," He muttered, sounding slightly impressed.

Julius nodded and walked away.

"Julius!" Beatrice called.

Julius looked back at her.

"You know what's going on in the capitol right now, I suppose. You know that you're out here with us just to separate you from your mistress, in fact. And you realize," Beatrice said calmly, "That once we reach Torgon Tower we'll *all* be prisoners. Even if you happen to occupy the other side of the bars."

Julius paused and then nodded glumly before walking away.

"What was that all about?" Puck asked.

Beatrice made a face. "Betty doesn't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe... making a connection, I suppose."

"Julius is a really good guy," Mimi assured them. "He'll do whatever he can for us. That being said, Mimi thinks that we should start planning our escape. Mimi doubts that this 'trial' they promised her is going to happen any time soon. And even if it did, Mimi thinks that she already knows the verdict."

Betty took a deep breath. "Enough! Betty has wasted days feeling sorry for herself! Betty's Subaru is in trouble! Julius said that Betty's Subaru is sad because he misses Betty and Bubby! If Betty's Subaru can't come to Betty then Betty and Bubby will go to Subaru!"

"What are you saying, Betty?" Puck asked in a somber voice.

"Betty and Bubby... and Mimi," She added reluctantly. "Will break out of here and find Betty's Subaru! And Betty and Bubby's Mother!"

"Yay!" Mimi cheered. "Mimi is *in*! When do we leave?" Her voice suggesting that she felt ready to break out right now.

"One question, Betty," Puck sighed. "You keep assuming that Subaru and your mother are in the same place. What if they're not? Which one are you going to go searching for?"

Beatrice hesitated.

"Can I offer you any tea or refreshments?" Crusch asked in a perfunctory tone as the three princesses sat in Crusch's private antechamber of her nearby estate.

"I think we should just get down to business," Anastasia said in an uneven voice.

"Are we sure that this room is secure?" Priscilla asked.

Under other circumstances, Crusch might have been offended. But considering what they were up against, she let it pass. Crusch nodded, "All of my servants are vetted very carefully and no one except... Felix is allowed in here in any case."

"Priscilla, you said that you had an idea?" Anastasia asked.

Priscilla frowned. "We are in a desperate situation, ladies," Priscilla said with no trace of her usual arrogance. "Two of us are going to be killed shortly and the third will only live long enough to be a brood sow for Montefort, Pickett, and Zyst's next puppet king."

"I think that we understand the basics," Anastasia said impatiently. "We need to do something about those three. What about hiring a professional assassin? I have some connections with the Black Silver Coins."

"Not a bad idea," Crusch mused. "However, we'll need to hit all three at the same time and that would be challenging. Any 'accident' will be assumed to be a sign of treachery on our part."

"It wouldn't work anyway," Priscilla dismissed. "Any assassin that we hired would need to get by Cecilus. I doubt that we could find such a person."

"Priscilla, who is this 'Cecilus,' anyway? You seemed to know him," Anastasia asked.

Priscilla made a face. "Cecilus Segmunt is the highest ranking Divine General in the Vollachian Empire. The sword of the Emperor," Priscilla curled her lip. "His power is said to rival Reinhard van Astrea's."

"Well, we can drop the assassin idea then," Crusch grumbled. "We're not going to be able to find an assassin who plays in that weight class."

"I've heard rumors of one in Kararagi," Anastasia said dubiously. "A shinobi. But he mostly does jobs for the government. I'm not sure if he would accept an independent contract."

"And it's pretty unlikely that the Kararagi city states would want to help us anyway. It's probable that they'd feel more sympathetic to Montefort than us," Priscilla grumbled.

Anastasia shook her head. "What is going on here, anyway? Why is Vollachia involved in this mess in the first place?" Anastasia asked. "I don't understand why they'd *care* if Subaru Natsuki becomes King or not. Is working with Montefort really that much preferable? And you'd think that Vollachia would be thrilled to see its main rival dedicate itself to another few decades of violent internal strife, no matter *what* caused it."

"They don't care about Subaru Natsuki," Crusch explained. "But they *do* care about a civil war. A war between rival noble factions would delight Vollachia to no end but a race war between humans and demi-humans or a revolution between the nobility and the peasantry is an entirely different situation. The rise of the demi-humans fifty years ago was a disaster for the entire continent, both economically and socially. Every nation has its own racial tensions as well as frictions between the upper and lower classes. Lagunica was the only nation that actually had a civil war but the chaos spread everywhere. If Lagunica goes up in flames, the other countries will feel the burn as well."

"If we can't get past Cecilus than I suppose that puts physical force out of the equation to deal with Montefort," Priscilla said, returning to the original subject. "We'll have to rely on guile. Crusch, you're our best politician. Is there any way we could gather enough political capital to counter Montefort, Pickett, and Zyst?"

Crusch shook her head. "Unlikely. That's why we were all so thrilled when we each recruited one of them to our factions," She said bitterly. "They were hugely powerful and influential. We probably should have spent more time thinking about what that meant. When Montefort swore his support to me, I never realized that it amounted to no more than a bet with the other two members of their triumvirate about which one of us would win the throne." She paused. "Anastasia, you know where Julius and Mimi are at least. I'm sure that you have the resources to sneak a guard and a few prisoners out of Torgon prison. The three of you could return to Kararagi where you'd be safe. I doubt that Montefort would pursue you there. It wouldn't be worth the trouble. Especially since he knows that I *can't* run as long as Felix is a hostage and I don't know where he is."

"I had considered that," Anastasia admitted. "That was my very first thought. It certainly sounds easy and that worries me. Pickett hasn't even said anything to me since this all started."

"Are you complaining?" Priscilla asked.

"No, but I am suspicious. Pickett has leverage over me and the entire Hoshin Trading Company with Julius and Mimi taken hostage. I can't imagine that he wouldn't use that leverage to try to fill his pockets but so far, nothing."

"It's useful that Julius wasn't *kidnapped* though," Crusch mused. "He could certainly find an opportunity to disappear from Torgon. He could even remove the leverage from Anastasia if he found a way to sneak Mimi Pearlbaton out."

"I suspect that is part of the plan," Anastasia commented. "Either Montefort is trying to lure me into a trap by tempting me to act to free Julius and Mimi or he's simply trying to discard a pawn that he doesn't think he has any use for by letting us flee across the border."

"Most likely Montefort wants Crusch for the 'honor' of this golden slave collar," Priscilla interjected. "He was originally a member of her faction. I'd guess that Montefort only wants Anastasia around to remind Crusch that she can be replaced if threats against Felix's life don't make her behave."

"Crusch, you're called the 'Goddess of War.' The Lagunican army is loyal to you personally," Anastasia pointed out. "If we could free Felix, you could rally the troops to deal with Montefort and his supporters."

"Of course, finding the hostages is the hard part," Priscilla sighed.

Crusch shook her head. "Even if Felix were not a factor, I can't say that I'm certain that it would work," Crusch sighed. "I can easily lead my soldiers against any foreign foe but if I try to attack Montefort then *I'm* the one perceived as staging a coup. They might not believe me when I told them about Montefort's perfidy. I'm not sure how many of my officers would actually support me in that situation..."

"I refuse to believe that we're all *this* helpless!" Anastasia protested. "We're three of the most powerful people in the kingdom! There is no way that Montefort has disarmed us all this easily!"

"Don't kid yourself," Priscilla said sharply. "The whole time that they were in our factions, they were each learning how to manipulate us. They were learning where our pressure points were so they could control the newly crowned King. This is only slightly more overt than their original plan."

"Priscilla, why haven't you just left?" Crusch asked curiously. "I can't imagine that you're going to search for Aldebaran. What's keeping you here?"

"What?" She snorted. "Shall I go off to Gusteko or Kararagi with nothing but the clothes on my back and whatever gold I could carry? I've earned my rank and title and I'm not giving it up without a fight!"

Crusch gave a slow smile. "I never thought that I'd say this, Lady Priscilla but I approve of your attitude."

"Come to think of it... Priscilla might just be our ace in the hole," Anastasia mused.

"Of course I am!" Priscilla asserted. "...How?"

Anastasia smirked at her. "Montefort and the others are going to be watching Crusch and me closely but they already told you that they want you to disappear. You could go places that we can't and find allies to get us all out of this mess."

"Such as? What kind of allies could we find?" Priscilla asked. She frowned. "I'm certain that Vincent has his own agenda in this mess. Maybe he could be persuaded to assist us."

"Emperor Vincent?" Crusch asked incredulously. "Doesn't he want you dead?"

Priscilla hesitated. "It's... complicated. It's just the way that things are in Vollachia. Besides, can we think of anyone else who might be able to counter Montefort and the others?"

"My first thought was Subaru Natsuki," Anastasia said.

Crusch started. "What?!"

"He had the cunning to outmaneuver all of us," Anastasia pointed out. "And if what you told me about the Sin Archbishops was true then he was able to hold his own against a foe that even Reinhard van Astrea couldn't defeat. Julius said that he even managed to defeat an entire Gusteko army that outnumbered him two hundred to one. What better ally could we have?"

"We can't trust Subaru Natsuki!" Crusch protested. "He's fallen under the influence of the Witch of Envy!"

Priscilla and Anastasia both stared at her. "Crusch," Anastasia asked in an incredulous tone. "You don't really *believe* that ridiculous story about Subaru Natsuki roaming around the woods with the Witch of Envy in tow, do you?"

"He burned the entire valley alive!" Crusch pointed out. "My spies claim that according to the survivors, he started this conflagration by simply raising his hand! Not even Roswaal could accomplish that!"

"Were you not listening to Julius?" Priscilla said in a scathing tone. "He explained exactly how this trap was set! It was trickery and nothing more! Even Al could have created that trap, given enough time!"

Crusch held her tongue. *Nobody is going to believe me. Ironically, Felix's evidence makes the accusation seem even more unbelievable. They'd need to see her with their own eyes before I'd have any chance of convincing them and perhaps even then I might fail. Julius spent just a little time with the witch and already seems to have fallen under her spell! Strangely, I think that Julius has a higher opinion of the witch than he does of Subaru Natsuki, although perhaps that simply reflects good judgment on his part...*

Moreover, Felix's life hangs in the balance. I hate to admit it but Anastasia has a point. Subaru Natsuki is a genius among geniuses and his power might very well rival Reinhard van Astrea. We have a common foe and he is the only trump card that I can even imagine winning us this game. As much as I hate to admit it, perhaps a deal with the devil is called for. I might be able to use one devil to strike down another. With any luck, they'll both be exhausted after the struggle and I can find a way to deal with Montefort's faction and Subaru Natsuki's witch.

"Assuming that we did wish to seek an alliance with Subaru Natsuki, how would we begin?" Crusch asked quietly.

"I'll find him," Priscilla said confidently. "My luck will lead me to him."

Crusch shook her head. "Our hopes of freedom depend solely on luck," Crusch sighed.

"If we do find him, what do we offer him?" Anastasia asked. "He's out of the royal selection now, thanks to Montefort's coup. What could we promise him in exchange for helping us?"

Priscilla shrugged, "Subaru Natsuki is no fool. He'll realize that if he wants the crown, he'll need to take it by main force. We can help him destroy Montefort's faction and then claim the throne. We'll make the same offer of alliance that we discussed the other day: The Queen and the Chancellor. We'll offer him all of our assistance in claiming the throne and carrying out his agenda."

Crusch shook her head ruefully. *If you poor fools only knew what his agenda truly was...*

"That makes sense," Anastasia agreed. She glanced at Crusch. "Is there any message you want Priscilla to deliver to Subaru for you?"

Crusch frowned, looking down at the floor. *Would you really sell your soul to the devil? Subaru Natsuki is working with the Witch, whether willingly or due to enchantment. Working with Subaru Natsuki is working with the Witch. And witchcraft is the only viable explanation for the terrifying power he possesses. Montefort's lies may have a grain of truth within them.*

All the same, would you choose Montefort over Subaru Natsuki? Montefort is just as much a monster even without witchcraft. In truth, he is more of a monster. Whatever your grievances against Subaru Natsuki and his Witch, they have yet to stoop to hostage taking or threats of torture and murder inflicted on innocent people. Devil or not, perhaps the enemy of your enemy is your ally, if not your friend.

Montefort will never return Felix to you. Priscilla was right. Felix will be a lifelong prisoner who will be tortured and

then destroyed at whatever moment Montefort decides.

Your father would be deeply ashamed of you. Crusch of House Karnstein should be able to protect the nation. Instead she has failed to protect even her closest friend, ally, and confidant. If that doesn't merit selling your soul to the devil, perhaps it would be worth renting it for a time...

Crusch looked up at Priscilla. "Please tell Subaru Natsuki that if he can aid me in rescuing Felix... I'll be grateful."

Capella sat in her cell fuming. She was the only prisoner in this part of the dungeon and she hadn't seen a guard in some time. She'd been questioned for hours, poked, prodded, and beaten but all that had been gotten out of her were screams and curses.

Now she was starting to feel hungry. Her. The beautiful, illustrious Capella Emerada Lugnica's perfect body was betraying her by demanding food.

This single intrusive violation that her jailers had inflicted on her enraged Capella more than all the others combined. Her body was divine. It was just wrong for it to be emitting feelings of distress for something as mundane as lack of food.

Capella suddenly realized that someone was standing in front of her cell and she threw herself at the door with a snarl.

She froze, suddenly recognizing the figure. "Oh my," Capella whispered, her harsh voice growing silky. "This is a surprise. How many years has it been? And you came all the way down here just to see little old me? Have you missed me?"

"I haven't given you a second thought since striking our bargain," He said coldly.

"Oh, that's so mean," Capella pouted in what was clearly intended to be a flirtatious tone. "I never realized that you were connected to Siros. It looks like I could have found a much easier way to get what I wanted."

"I couldn't give you access to the Vault even if I wanted to."

Capella's eyes flickered. She struck a jaunty pose. "It's funny that we meet again like this. You should really let me out of here now. Those wicked old torturers are being so mean to me," She said in a exaggerated pout, her tone petulant. "I might just... break under all that questioning! I wonder what would happen if I told them about our old arrangement..."

"No one would believe you in ten lifetimes," He said bluntly.

"Are you so sure?" She cooed.

He didn't respond.

Capella laughed and strutted around her cell. "If you're not worried about me spilling the beans then why did you come down here? Have you been fantasizing about me?" Capella said in a flirtatious tone. "Do I dance through your dreams late at night wearing nothing but a smile? Truthfully, I've missed you too."

"Does this 'good girl' act that you're attempting, ever work?" He asked in a bored tone.

"Why? Do you prefer bad girls?" Capella asked coyly, reaching through the bars to trace a finger along his chest. "Just let me out of this cell and I'll be a *real* bad girl for you."

"You're nothing but skin and bones and you look like you're fourteen," Her visitor said in contempt. "If you're going to try to play the seductress, why not choose a body that a sane person might be attracted to?"

Capella's jaw dropped and her eyes blazed with hatred. She threw herself at the cell door, grabbing it with both hands and shaking it furiously. "You listen to me, you disgusting old perv," She said through clenched teeth. "My body is *perfect!* It is striking, immaculate, and completely without flaw! I am the embodiment of beauty! *Everyone* who isn't a queer is dreaming about my body, you pathetic little shit-fucker! You should be down on your hands and knees fucking *begging* me to lay my hands on your gross, dirty dick just so that I can fucking tear it off!"

"Much better," He said calmly. "I think that I actually prefer you like this."

Capella hissed at him. She took a deep breath and stepped back from the cell door. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I need more of what you gave me last time."

"Why the fuck should I?" Capella asked bluntly.

"If you ever want your freedom again, much less for your stay here to be pleasant, you would do well to humor me," He held up a small heavy cup that looked like it was made of stone.

Capella gave him a thin smile. She raised a finger to her lips and made some show of sensuously licking and sucking on it while holding his gaze.

A moment later, she bit down hard on her digit with a crunch. Her lips widened into a lunatic grin as the blood flowed down her chin.

Capella started to stick her finger into the offered cup then pulled it away at the last second. Capella's dark red, almost

black, blood continued to drip from her rapidly healing digit onto the floor where it ate into the stone tiles with an angry hiss.

"On second thought, maybe not," Capella said with a smirk. "Maybe we should talk about how you're going to get me out of here first..."

He fumed, turned on his heel and stormed away.

Capella grinned at him. "Don't be a stranger now," She called after him mockingly. "Maybe later, you could come back down here so that I can help you celebrate..."

Capella licked at the blood still dripping down her chin with an unnaturally long tongue.

Emilia and Subaru had joined Anri for an early dinner and then ridden Patrasche back to the Grand Archives. Gustov had returned to the Archives from a meeting around then and he proceeded to go through the books with a fine-tooth comb, looking for any references whatsoever to this kind of memory curse.

Subaru and Emilia couldn't make heads or tails out of most of the languages these ancient books were written in so they decided to go outside and enjoy some fresh air as the sun started to set. Gustov and his assistants remained inside working hard on their research.

Gusteko was much chillier than Lagunica. Instead of early summer, the area was in the midst of a begrudging spring. Subaru was surprised to discover how comfortable he felt here. After enduring a few days of the Elier Forest's unnatural chill, he supposed that he had toughened up.

Subaru and Emilia sat on the big stone steps outside the Archives.

"Mili," Subaru muttered. "What do you think we should do now?"

"Hm?"

"I mean... if there's really no cure in the Grand Archives then... I don't know what to try next," Subaru whispered despairingly. "But I don't just want to give up!"

Emilia took his hands. "We'll never give up, Subaru. But maybe... maybe it's time to accept what we can't change."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like you said. Even if we can't restore Daddy's memories of me, we will still find him and bring him home. Our family will be whole again, one way or the other. And if I need to convince Beatrice and Puck to love me all over again then that's just what I have to do. There's a difference between giving up and changing tactics, Subaru."

Subaru took a deep breath. "'We can't direct the wind but we can adjust our sails.'"

"I'm not sure that I understood that metaphor, Subaru, but I think that you're probably right."

Subaru chuckled.

That evening for the first time in years, Priscilla *walked* back to her townhouse in the city.

Priscilla was livid. The traffic in town this afternoon had been ridiculous. After her carriage had been stuck in one place for over an hour, Priscilla had simply given up and resolved to walk the last mile to her home.

The walk took her an inordinate amount of time as one of her heels had broken off during the hike and so she found herself limping back to her townhouse.

She was about to turn the final corner to her home when she heard a harsh voice demand: "-Where is Priscilla Barielle?"

Priscilla froze in place and drew back. She pressed flat against the wall, listening carefully. Priscilla was a woman who appreciated her creature comforts but she was also a product of the cutthroat world of Vollachian politics. Before anything else, Priscilla was a survivor.

Priscilla heard the tired, old voice of Fron, her butler. "She's not here-"

Fronn's words cut off with a strangling sound.

Priscilla peered around the corner. Fron was being held in the air by his neck. Six enormous thugs were gathered around him. Most of them wore hooded cloaks to disguise themselves. "Where is she?" The lead thug demanded. "Her coachmen told us she was here!"

Priscilla's eyes narrowed and she made a mental note to discharge the driver who'd given her up to these thugs.

"She's... not... here!" Fron gasped.

"The where is she?!"

Priscilla quietly walked away. Priscilla had a high opinion of her abilities in combat, an opinion that was not unjustified,

but instinct told her that picking this particular fight was unwise.

Those men were certainly hired by Montefort and the others. They know that common rough necks are no match for me. There's fair odds that they're just the bait. If I attacked them then I'd probably discover that Cecilius Segmund is waiting for me in the wings.

Would Cecilius actually kill me? Vincent certainly doesn't want me dead... but he probably didn't feel safe telling Cecilius that. Exposing that Vincent cares about me would make Vincent vulnerable. That's just how Vollaichian politics are.

The situation has deteriorated. I need to get out of town. Unseen. Tonight.

I only have about twenty gold coins in my pocket. This should be interesting.

And annoying.

My luck will see me through this mess but I shouldn't expect it to be pleasant. I must find Subaru Natsuki.

Anri sat on the floor in her brother's playroom, just watching him fuss with his 'Anri' doll.

She sighed. "I really wish you were... feeling better, Gael. I don't know how to handle all this new responsibility. People are acting like I suddenly have all the answers. But the truth is, I'm the same stupid girl I was last week when I blundered like an idiot into a trap set by Malcolm an Griest. I don't know how to run a country. It's really kind of sad since I've been training for it most of my life and I'm still absolutely clueless about what to do and how to do it."

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," She muttered.

Uncle Radu walked into the room. He looked at Gael sadly and then sat down beside her. "How are you feeling?"

Anri smiled. "A little overwhelmed, honestly."

"You should be proud!" Radu said. "You haven't even sat down on the throne yet and your deeds are already worth a song or two. I say that from experience. I sneaked off to the local tavern tonight and heard a couple. The music was OK but her voice was horribly off key."

"Uncle," Anri scoffed with a rueful smile.

"I'm serious! Even if you never do anything else in your entire life, you already rank among the most accomplished members of your line."

Anri sighed. "Do you think that means they'll let me get away with not going anything for the first few years?"

Before Radu could answer a soldier there was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Radu called.

A soldier in a muddy, travel stained cloak came in. "Sir!" He saluted.

Radu sighed. "I thought that I asked for us to be left alone tonight. The Princess has had a hell of a time!" Radu said, sounding more resigned than angry.

"I'm sorry, Regent, but this is an emergency. House Craite, House Griest, House Brokvar, House Hilde, and House Voivode are demanding to see the Princess at a council. Tomorrow night. They claim that they're prepared to declare war if she does not appear."

"For what?!" Radu demanded.

The soldier looked awkward. "They demand that the Princess be brought up on charges for the loss of their men-"

"The same men who were holding her prisoner and pursued her when she escaped?" Radu asked sarcastically.

"...And also for the fostering of witches," The soldier finished lamely. "Apparently, Lagunica announced that it was prepared to declare war to eradicate the witches."

"What?!" Anri cried in outrage.

The soldier shrugged helplessly. "I'm just the messenger, your Highness!"

"Of course you are," Radu said apologetically. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Uncle, this is madness! They're prepared to declare war on us while they're still worried about a war with Lagunica?" Anri asked incredulously.

Radu shrugged. "If they really believe their own publicity, then they think attacking us is depriving Lagunica of its principle staging ground in the north..." He looked at the soldier. "Where is this summit?"

"Kocytos," The soldier answered. "The mayor has agreed to host."

Radu looked thoughtful. "This might work out well. I expect that most of the influential figures in Gusteko will be there.

It'll be fertile ground for you to make new alliances. If enough of the lesser Houses join you, it might persuade the other Princes to back off."

"We need to leave immediately, Uncle," Anri said quietly.

Radu nodded. "Yes, we do. I'll round up the palace guard for an escort. You should go grab your friends. They'll want to be present for this. And something tells me you'll appreciate having some extra muscle along on this trip."

"So that's what happened," Felt finished with a sigh.

That evening Felt, Garfiel, and Reinhard were in Reinhard's small room at the inn in the desert town of Mirula. Felt sat on the bed while Reinhard and Garfiel stood nearby.

"This is... unthinkable," Reinhard murmured, his legs buckling underneath him and forcing to sit down on the bed beside Felt. "Our friend, the best man that I have ever had the good fortune to know, branded a Witch? Impossible."

"It happened, Red," Garfiel growled. "Can I just assume that none of us give a damn about the Captain being declared a Witch?"

Reinhard stared at Garfiel in shock, "Master Garfiel, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the Captain is in serious danger and we better be the ones who find him first! Anyone else is going to try and kill him on sight! We need to find him and hide him until we can figure out what we're going to do about this," Garfiel snorted.

"What we're going to do about it?" Felt echoed incredulously. "What? Like the royal assembly is just going to change their minds about this? This is an assassination, fleabag. The nobility wants Subaru dead and this is how they're going to do it."

"Then we find him and we get him over the border!" Garfiel declared.

"That will do no good, Master Garfiel," Reinhard murmured. "A convicted Witch is damned in the eyes of all civilized men."

Garfield snorted. "Come on! Gusteko and Vollachia wouldn't believe the sages' council if they said that the sky was blue! If Lagunica wants the Captain dead then either nation would probably give him a medal!"

Reinhard shook his head. "A charge of witchcraft is different, I'm afraid. No matter what nation Subaru was to go to, the authorities would respect the judgment of the sages' council in this regard and kill Subaru without thought."

The room was quiet for a moment.

Garfiel scoffed. "Then... we just have to come up with a better plan to hide him, right? Maybe we sneak him back to the Sanctuary or... Arlem. Come on, guys! He's our friend! We're not going to just abandon the Captain now, right?"

No one answered. Felt stared down at the floor and Reinhard looked miserable.

"Right?" Garfiel asked in a plaintive voice.

Reinhard sighed and buried his face in his hands. "How did it come to this? Since the day I met Subaru, I've been beset by visions of a golden age. Visions of the rule of a King ordained by Heaven. The moment that I handed that royal insignia to Subaru Natsuki was the proudest moment in my entire life," Reinhard said, seemingly on the verge of tears.

Felt frowned. "*You* gave him the insignia? I didn't know that."

Reinhard nodded slowly. "I expect that I never mentioned it but I waited beside his bed for two days, waiting for him to wake up so that I could give it to him..."

Felt's eyes widened.

Reinhard rose to his feet. "Perhaps we should retire. I'm uncertain of what we can do now but-"

"Reinhard," Felt whispered.

The two men turned to look at Felt and saw that her eyes were huge and she stared off into the distance at nothing. "What did you just say?"

Reinhard frowned. "I said that we should retire-"

"Not that! Before that!"

Reinhard looked at Garfiel for a clue to what was going on but the demi-human looked just as confused as he felt. "I said that I waited beside Subaru's bed so I could-"

"When, Red?! *When* did you give the insignia to him?!"

Reinhard shook his head. "Miss Felt, I don't understand-"

"God damn it, Red! Just answer the fucking question!" Felt exploded.

Reinhard flinched. "I... I gave it to him as soon as he woke up from the injuries that the Bowel Hunter inflicted."

Felt gathered her hands to her mouth. Her eyes darted all over the room.

Garfiel coughed. "Uh, care to let us in on what you're thinking, shrimp?"

Felt stood up. "Reinhard, think very carefully," She said in a barely controlled voice. "Why did you give him that insignia? Why did it even cross your mind to try and see if it would react to him? Dragon priestesses are always female."

Reinhard thought for a moment. "I saw the insignia glowing in his hand in your grandfather's tavern."

"Yes! The insignia I stole!" Felt shouted. "Whose insignia was *that*?!"

"It was... Subaru's..." Reinhard trailed off.

"Hey, can anyone catch the new guy up to speed?" Garfiel asked plaintively.

Felt sat back down on the bed. "Who did I steal that insignia from? I thought it was Subaru's but..." She whispered to herself.

Reinhard winced. "Miss Felt, please. Subaru *gave* you that-"

"Oh, go bury it, Red!" Felt screamed. "Where did I get that insignia?" She demanded.

Reinhard took a deep breath. "You stole it from... Subaru," He said but a hint of doubt entered into his voice.

"Yeah! But how did I steal the insignia before you gave it to him, Red?" Felt continued, her voice gaining conviction. "Why would you give him an insignia if he already had one?!"

"I... I don't know," Reinhard admitted. "I must be misremembering, likely confusing the time that I first gave him his insignia and the time when I returned the insignia that you had... borrowed."

"No, you're not, Reinhard. We're not misremembering. It's just like Beatrice said," Felt whispered. "It's a paradox," Felt's eyes widened and she clapped both hands over her mouth.

"Miss Felt, forgive me, but what is a 'paradox?'"

Felt didn't answer. She sat there frozen, her eyes staring in horror.

"A paradox is a statement that is inherently impossible or logically inconsistent," Garfiel explained.

Felt and Reinhard both looked at him in astonishment.

Garfiel scowled. "What?! I know stuff! Fuck off, the both of you!"

"Miss Felt," Reinhard said, kneeling by her side in concern, "I confess that I share your confusion on this matter. What does it mean?"

Felt stared off into the distance for a long moment and then she took a deep breath. "Beatrice told me... that Witchcraft can be used to change memories like we think happened to Subaru... but it doesn't have infinite power. When it tries to add or remove people from someone's memory, it... sometimes runs into problems that it can't resolve. She said that the way to convince a person that their memories have been altered is to find a paradox in those memories," Felt stared at Reinhard with a horrified look on her face.

Reinhard frowned, puzzling his way through this.

"Shrimp," Garfiel said slowly. "You were talking about finding a paradox in Subaru's memory. But if the paradox is in your and Reinhard's memories then..."

"Subaru was right," Felt whispered. "It wasn't him. *We* were the ones bewitched."

"Miss Felt," Reinhard protested. "The evil *witch* is the one responsible for this accursed mess. We may be feeling a bit confused right now but I am certain that there is a perfectly logical explanation for all of this."

Felt shook her head. "No. No, there isn't, Reinhard," Felt whispered. "Our memories don't make sense. That means that *our* memories were the ones that were changed."

"But, shrimp," Garfiel said in a puzzled voice, "Why? I mean... why just stop there? If the witchcraft fixed everything else in our memories so perfectly, why did it blunder in this one case?"

Felt stared down at the floor, deep in thought. "I don't know, Garf. Maybe... Maybe it just couldn't find a solution." She thought hard about it. "Subaru told us that he had gotten engaged to the witch after he held her insignia. Let's just... pretend for a minute that's what really happened. I stole *her* insignia and then she and Subaru tracked me down at Gramps's. Then Reinhard fended off Elsa and saw the insignia glowing in Subaru's hand. That's why he realized that Subaru was a possible candidate."

"Miss Felt, none of that happened," Reinhard corrected gently.

Felt ignored him. "Maybe there was just... no other way to fix the inconsistency. Maybe the changes needed to do anything else about it were just so overwhelming that the witchcraft gave up. If Subaru and the witch *were* engaged and both were fighting for the throne, then they basically had one royal camp. All the witchcraft needed to do was delete... 'Emilia' from our memories and attribute to Subaru everything that she did. Easy enough. But how do you make Subaru come into contact with a royal insignia in the first place? They don't just hand them out for anyone to try. They never would have offered it to a *man* to ascertain if he could be a priestess, there would have been no point! That means that I would have had to steal an insignia from *another* candidate to make this work and then, once Subaru held the insignia, he would have had to get engaged to them to keep *them* in the selection or they would have been disqualified. And if either of *those* events had happened, how many more things would need to be changed?"

Reinhard frowned. "If our memories are being befuddled, then the most likely explanation is that the witch's dark power is steadily growing. She is gaining the ability to manipulate the memories of more people," Reinhard muttered in worry.

Reinhard shook his head and took Felt's hand. "Miss Felt," He urged. "I confess that I do not fully understand what is going on right now, but you are extremely tired. Perhaps it would be best for you to retire for the evening and look at the matter with fresh eyes in the morning. Perhaps your remarkable intelligence will enable you to resolve this inconsistency."

Felt stared at Reinhard with a horrified expression. "I've already resolved it, Reinhard," She whispered in shock, "Subaru was right all along. And that means... That means that I have made a titanic, *unforgivable* mistake."

Felt buried her face in her hands and wept.

Chapter 25: Chapter 25

The next morning, Felt and Reinhard were alone in his room. Garfiel had quickly excused himself. His absence had nothing to do with giving them alone time, the atmosphere in the room was just that uncomfortable.

"Red! Listen to me!" Felt demanded.

Reinhard flinched and looked uncomfortable. "I am listening, Miss Felt. I have listened to every word that you have said."

"You're listening but you don't *believe* me!" Felt shouted, her hands balling up into fists.

"I... regretfully must admit that I do not, Miss Felt. Your... theory lacks balance and good sense," He said apologetically.

"Reinhard! What if Subaru was just *right*?!" Felt demanded.

"Miss Felt, need I remind you that this witch tortured you with frost flowers?" Reinhard's voice burning with suppressed rage.

Felt closed her eyes and shuddered violently. She panted for breath for a long time before finally opening her eyes. "Reinhard, believe me, you'll *never* have to remind me of that. I remember it very clearly."

"If this woman was not a witch, if she was truly the good person that Subaru has been deceived into viewing her as," Reinhard's voice became like iron as he reflected on Felt's torment. "Then why did this unforgivable abomination occur? Why would any good and kind person stoop to such action as pointless torture?"

Felt bit her lip. "Maybe... it really *was* an accident," Felt said reluctantly. "Maybe she really did lose control of her magic while she was fighting Lye. Remember, she cursed Subaru too! Whether she was erased from our memories or if she's bewitched Subaru, why would she curse her greatest ally?"

Reinhard thought for a moment. "Perhaps for deniability?" He suggested.

Felt rolled her eyes. "Reinhard, who in the world is dumb enough to decide to torture somebody in public and then decide that they need to torture their own ally to convince people it was just an accident. She would have had to hate me an awful lot for this to make any sense."

"Or perhaps she intended for *you* to die and for Subaru to live, as surely would have happened if not for the spirits' intervention, Miss Felt," Reinhard said, his voice a soft growl. "Subaru trusts you-"

Felt flinched.

"-And she may have decided that she needed to remove you from the situation before you could convince Subaru to listen to reason. Subaru has great respect for your mind and judgment. Given time, I have no doubt that you could have reached him and convinced him to reject the witch. Because she injured Subaru as well, who believes that she loves him, perhaps would have been sufficient to convince him that your death was merely an unfortunate accident."

Felt shook her head. "Red!" She protested.

"Miss Felt," Reinhard said sadly. "I implore you. Please use your remarkable intelligence to consider this matter logically. Do you recall that... err 'Occam's Razor' that you told me about?"

"What about it?"

"Your theory requires that some powerful unknown magic has rewritten the memories of the entire world. Whereas if

we assume that the witch is in fact a witch, then we need only require the witch to have manipulated the memories of a small handful of individuals that she has been in close contact with. I ask you, which is more believable?"

Felt choked on that. She scrambled, looking for an answer. "Reinhard. I *need* you to believe me here! Subaru is in *real* trouble! Now the entire world is after him and if we don't help him he has no chance at all!"

"I have every intention of helping him, Miss Felt," Reinhard said firmly. "I will see justice done upon this witch for her crimes against Subaru and most especially against you. I will prove to the world that this was all simply a regrettable mistake and redeem the trust of the man that I admire most."

Felt bit her lip and went for broke. "Reinhard, you *can't* kill the witch!"

"What do you mean?"

"Killing the witch will kill Subaru!"

Reinhard's eyes became huge. "What are you saying?"

"If you kill the witch then Subaru will choose to die!"

"Where did you acquire this information?!"

"Beako told me."

"Miss... Beatrice?" Reinhard said flatly.

"Yes! She said that the only reason the spirits didn't kill the witch themselves was because they could tell that killing the witch would kill Subaru!"

Reinhard gave Felt a steady look. He didn't respond right away. "Then this fact would establish that we are unable to slay the witch..."

"Exactly!"

"Miss Felt," Reinhard said slowly. "Tell me... when did you... well, develop this... recollection?"

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Felt, this is the first time that you've mentioned this vital information to me," He said gently. "Despite having no contact with the spirits for some time."

Felt sighed. "I knew that you were suspicious of Beatrice. I decided to sit on it for a while until you learned to trust Beako again."

Reinhard hesitated. "Miss Felt, how do you know that this... memory wasn't implanted by the witch?"

Felt started at him incredulously. "When?! I haven't seen the witch since I was with you!"

Reinhard looked awkward. "Miss Felt, does it not seem... somewhat... *convenient* that you suddenly remembered information that prohibits me from hunting down and killing the witch?"

Felt's eyes widened. *Oh no. Oh, no no no. He can't be thinking...*

Reinhard sighed. "I fear that you've fallen under the witch's influence as well. She must be corrupting your memories as she did our poor friend Subaru. The wicked fiend. Not only did she torture and abuse you but now she twists your mind and memories in order to avoid her just punishment. This is absolutely unforgivable. I vow as a Knight of the Kingdom, Miss Felt, that I shall not rest until I have hunted down this witch and done justice upon her!"

"Reinhard! Why won't you believe me?!" Felt begged with tears in her eyes.

Reinhard hesitated.

"Reinhard?" She whispered.

Reinhard sighed and looked away. "Miss Felt," He murmured in an almost pleading voice. "I am well aware of your extraordinary intelligence. You have always been able to discern the truth of things when I could not. But now you ask me to believe that everyone in this world except for Subaru has had their memories modified by some as yet unexplained power for some completely unexplained reason. You are asking me to take an enormous amount on faith and you lack any evidence for it at all."

Felt's eyes widened.

"...So that's what happened," Garfiel finished helplessly, standing with the twins beside their carriage.

Garfiel was explaining to the twins the revelation that Felt had reached last night. The three stood beside their carriage in Mirula waiting for Felt and Reinhard.

Rem had a stricken look on her face as if she was second-guessing everything. "So... we are the ones who were

bewitched?" Rem murmured.

Ram was quiet for a moment. "I received a letter from Lord Roswaal this morning. He commands us to return to the manor for a time and attend to business there before continuing our search for Subaru Natsuki. He also bids us to offer sanctuary to 'the old man.'"

Garfiel frowned. "What old man?"

"Hey, fleabag," A deep voice rumbled.

Garfiel turned around and saw a towering figure walking toward him.

"Gramps?!" Garfiel said incredulously. "What the hell are you doing here? *How* the hell did you get here?"

Rom snorted. "For one thing, I found out that the kingdom was looking for me, hoping to use me to try to get leverage over Felt. It's not easy for me to blend in with the crowd so I got out of town. I paid a merchant to carry me in his wagon, hidden in a giant crate. It wound up costing me a gold coin," Rom made a frustrated face. "Don't tell Felt I said that. I'm going to replace the money I borrowed from her before she notices."

Garfiel chuckled. "Yeah, Felt warned me about how you were."

"Alright!" Felt said, storming out of the inn, her face livid. Her face was fixed in a snarl and her eyes were as hard as agates but tears were streaming down her face. She was rubbing her wrist as if it pained her. "Let's get out of here!"

She was biting off curses with each step and her face was black as a thundercloud. Felt walked completely by Rom without even noticing the giant. Then she blinked and turned around. "Gramps?!"

"Hey, Felt," Rom said calmly.

"What are you *doing* here?!"

"Checking on you!" Rom snorted. "And avoiding the royal guard..."

"How did you even know where we were?!" Felt demanded.

Rom looked awkward. "I... got a letter..." Rom murmured, clearly uncomfortable.

"From who?!" Felt asked incredulously. "None of us had time to send you a letter!"

Rom hesitated.

Garfield could tell that Rom was uncomfortable talking about this. "Um. So, we aren't waiting for Red before we leave?" Garfiel stepped in before Felt could inquire further.

Felt scowled. "Reinhard fucking Astrea apparently has better things to do!" Felt snapped.

"Like what?" Garfiel said in disbelief.

Felt snorted. "Reinhard is operating on the assumption that the witch is simply getting stronger and that any problems with our memories are because she's regaining her power to twist more people. He refuses to even consider the notion that Subaru might have been right about... Emilia," She ended with a grumble.

Garfiel stared at her for a long moment. "Huh?! That doesn't make a lick of sense!"

Felt shook her head violently. "I told him that! The stubborn idiot never changes his mind!" Felt grated, yanking her own hair in frustration. "Now he's even more determined to find and kill the witch because he's worried that her power is starting to corrupt *us*!"

"Then I assume that Sir Reinhard will not be accompanying you in your search?" Ram asked mildly.

"Reinhard is going to keep looking for Subaru on his own," Felt grumbled, holding her wrist. "The big dope remains convinced that all he needs to do is kill the witch and Subaru will be fine again."

"But Garf told us that Miss Beatrice said killing the witch would kill Subaru," Rem murmured.

"Yeah, so we better find him before Red does!" Garfiel squinted at Felt. "Hey, shrimp, what happened to your wrist?"

Felt snorted. "I sprained it. On a stubborn head."

Garfiel gaped. "You *punched* Reinhard?!"

"It felt a lot like pounding on brick," Felt admitted.

"The first lover's quarrel is often the most shocking," Ram said impassively.

"Watch it, Ram!" Felt snarled.

"I... could heal that for you," Rem offered quietly.

Felt stared at Rem for a long moment and then placed her wrist into Rem's hand. Rem began to use her magic to mend

the sprain.

"Alright, so..." Garfiel said awkwardly. "Ram just got some instructions from the clown. He says that they need to go back to the manor-"

"That's probably a good idea," Felt said calmly. She looked at the twins and sighed. "Look. Nobody knows that the two of you helped us escape from Fein. You should both get back to the manor before anyone starts to suspect you. I don't want you guys to be made fugitives too."

Felt gave Rem a not-quite-friendly look.

Garfiel looked back and forth between Rem and Felt before continuing. "Then I guess it's just going to be the three of us?" He asked the giant Rom.

Rom shook his head. "I don't think I can go with you, fleabag-"

"Hey, when did that become my official nickname?" Garfiel groaned.

Rom ignored him. "It's pretty hard for me to blend in. I left the capitol to get somewhere under cover. I can hang out here for a while until the dust settles."

Rem looked up at Rom and cleared her throat. "Master Rom," She said diffidently. "Perhaps you could return to Arlem with us? I'm certain that you would be welcome there. I doubt that our carriage would be very comfortable for you but I am sure that you'd fit as long as sister and I rode on top."

Rom frowned thoughtfully.

"It's a good idea, Gramps," Felt added. "The people at Arlem are good folks. Just tell them that you're my grandpa and they'll treat you alright."

Rom nodded. "OK. That makes sense. Here, Felt. I brought you this. I think you're going to need it." He handed her a bag of gold coins.

Felt frowned in confusion.

"There should be about fifty gold coins in there," Rom continued. "Subaru gave us almost forty that night and I've put both our earnings in there since then."

"Gramps!" Felt complained. "I can't take this! *You'll* need it!"

"Miss Felt," Rem said softly. "We'll take good care of your grandfather. You have my word. Please don't worry about him as long as he is in our keeping."

Felt gave Rem a hard look but finally nodded with a sigh.

Garfiel scratched his chin. "OK. So, I guess it's just the *two* of us then," Garfiel murmured. "What's the plan, shrimp?"

Felt sighed. "Well, first of all, I think that we had better get far away from here. Reinhard is leaving to do more searching today, despite having no idea where to look and no reason to think that Subaru is even in this country. I have it on good authority that we're both wanted by the kingdom at the moment. We better get over the border as quick as we can."

"And then what?" Garfiel asked. "We get to Gusteko and just start going door to door asking for the Captain and trust to luck?"

"I don't know, fleabag!" Felt said helplessly. "But we need to get out of here because as soon as Reinhard leaves, we're a target!"

"I get that!" Garfiel said. "But... we need a plan! What are we going to do when we get to Gusteko? I mean... maybe if we made enough noise the Captain might contact *us*..." He mused.

"Maybe he *would* have at one point," Felt grumbled, casting a hard look at Rem.

Rom looked reluctant. "I think that I might have another suggestion," Rom rumbled. "One of the reasons I came to find you was... I... got a letter from an old... acquaintance. Someone I knew in the war... Felt, they want to talk to you about... that bonehead that you've gotten yourself involved with."

"Gramps!" Felt exploded. "For the last fucking time! Red and I are just friends! ...Good friends... Best fri- Look, the point is that there is *nothing* going on between me and Reinhard so everyone can just stop implying anything different!"

Felt glared up at at her Grandfather, red faced and panting.

Rom stared down at her expressionlessly. "Not him, Felt. The *other* bonehead that you're involved with. Subaru."

"Oh," Felt flushed bright red.

"Hey, Felt," Garfiel said, fighting not to laugh. "Have you ever heard the phrase 'thou dost protest too much?'"

"Oh, just keep talking, fleabag!" Felt snapped. "You're *this* close to becoming my new rug!"

"If I could perhaps get this conversation back on track?" Ram asked in a bored voice.

Felt cleared her throat and squinted up at Rom. "So who wants to talk to me?"

Rom had a pained look on his face. "Someone... powerful. Someone very dangerous. Someone who wants to talk about what Subaru has been doing in the world. Someone who claims that they can help you find him..." He sighed.

Felt looked up at him. "What do you mean, Gramps?"

Rom looked awkward. "I have... a certain resource with connections to the Demi-Human Alliance and... to the Witch Cult," He admitted.

Everyone stared at him.

Felt's jaw was on the floor. "Who *is* this person, Gramps?" Felt asked in astonishment.

Rom sighed. "Someone *extremely* dangerous. I've never known them to lie so if they say that you'll be safe if you go see them... I believe that they're telling the truth. But they are and remain the most dangerous person I've ever known. You'll need to be very careful if you try to make contact."

Felt frowned.

Garfiel folded his arms across his chest. "Don't worry, Gramps. I got the shrimp's back!" He said firmly.

"Garf!" Felt protested.

Rom chuckled. "Honestly, I feel better knowing that you're keeping an eye on Felt."

"Seriously, Gramps?" Felt said in exasperation. "You too?!"

Garfiel gave Felt a serious look. "Funny, isn't it? That's just what Grams said to me before she went off with that loser. She said that she felt better knowing that you were keeping an eye on me."

Felt scratched her head, looking awkward.

Rom sighed and handed Felt a small letter. "Here's all the information that you'll need," Rom hesitated. "Take care of yourself, Felt."

Felt's face twisted in sadness. "I will, Gramps. You be safe too!" She urged him.

Rom suddenly knelt down and gathered Felt in his arms. The two were crying.

Garfiel glanced away awkwardly. He looked at the twins. Rem looked guilty and Ram looked indifferent.

Finally Rom and Felt separated.

"Master Rom, we should get going now," Rem said deferentially. The giant nodded and started to walk over to the carriage with Ram.

Rem looked at Felt uncomfortably. "Garf, Miss Felt... is there... anyway that I could persuade you to come back to Arlem with us?"

Garf's jaw tightened. "Rem. We need to go help the Captain."

Rem's face was cold. "Subaru would never take on such a risk for either of you!"

"Subaru saved my life the night that we met!" Felt snapped. "Then he gave me every gold coin he had because he wanted to see me and Gramps get out of the slums."

Rem just shook her head. "As I've said before: a fool. A man who assumes that good intentions and kind actions will lead him safely through the darkness. Now that same attitude and poor insight has led him to fall in love with a witch."

"Rem, I just told you!" Garf exclaimed in exasperation. "The elf isn't a witch! Our memories are fucked up! Felt proved it!"

"Garf! Don't you see that it doesn't matter?!" Rem demanded. "Whether she is a witch or not is not the issue! You can *not* trust Subaru Natsuki with your lives and safety. At the end of the day, he will *not* protect your lives if doing so puts the elf in danger. He will not protect *you*!"

"He did a pretty good job protecting us at the Sanctuary, didn't he?" Felt said coldly, folding her arms across her.

Rem looked at them sadly and shook her head. "I see that I will never convince you. You'll learn the truth as I did, slowly and bitterly. Subaru Natsuki has the heart of a chess player. He will sacrifice *any* piece on the board in order to protect the queen."

Garfiel and Felt just glared at her.

Rem sighed. "Miss Felt. I implore you. Please do your best to look after young Garf. He's strong and brave but also young and impetuous. I'll rest easier knowing that you are there to keep an eye on him."

Garf turned bright red. "Oh, shut up, Rem," He grumbled quietly.

Felt glared at Rem and gave a single nod.

Rem nodded sadly. "Good luck, Garf."

"You too, Rem. Hey, look after your sister for me, OK?" Garfiel replied.

Rem smiled at him. "Always."

Rem walked back toward the carriage where Ram and Rom waited.

"There are a lot of 'R's in that carriage," Garfiel observed as Felt quickly read the letter. "So where are we going?"

Felt sighed and tucked the letter into a pocket. "Abiate," She replied, walking slowly away.

"Never heard of it," Garfiel replied as he followed her.

"It's a good ways off to the southwest," Felt replied.

"Long walk?"

"Too long. We'll need to buy a ride. This isn't going to be a fun trip, fleabag. I've heard stories about Abiate. It's not a good place for demi-humans to be. You'll need to keep your head down."

"You will too," Garfiel reminded her. "Red eyes, remember? Somebody there is likely going to assume that you're a mixed blood even if you're not. And they aren't going to take the time to double check."

"This trip is sounding better and better," She sighed.

They walked in silence through the dusty desert town for a minute.

"So, Red really didn't believe you?" Garfiel asked.

Felt shook her head with a snarl. "No!" She thundered.

"I'm shocked," Garfiel said seriously. "I mean, he knows how much smarter you are than he is. And you know how much he cares about you..." Garfiel trailed off, looking at Felt apprehensively and anticipating another explosion.

Instead, Felt's face became stricken. She wrapped her arms around her thin body and she fell to her knees. "He said... he said that's *why* he couldn't believe me... He said that couldn't turn a blind eye when someone he... cared so much about... was clearly bewitched," Felt shook her head, her eyes watery. "This is a taste of my own medicine, Garf," She whispered.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I told Reinhard what I'd figured out. I told him I was sure that it was us who'd been bewitched. He didn't believe me. He thought... that our thoughts must be being corrupted as well now because the Witch has gotten stronger."

"Not that he has any basis for believing that," Garfiel sighed.

Felt didn't even seem to hear him. "We were talking and arguing and suddenly I realized... I was saying everything to Red that Subaru said to me. It was almost word for word. I begged him to believe me. I reminded him that he knew how much smarter I was and that I could see the webs within the webs that he couldn't. I... I reminded him how much he... he cared about me..." She whispered. "And I asked him to believe me..."

Felt shuddered and looked like she would burst into tears. "He said that he... he cared too much about me to ever forgive what the witch had done to me..."

Garfiel looked at Felt's anguished face and his expression twisted in sympathy. He knelt down beside her and caught her in a great hug.

Felt covered her face. "This is all my fault, Garf! This is me being given a taste of my own fucking medicine!" She shook her head. "The Gods want me to know how Subaru felt when I turned my back on him!"

"Hey!" Garfiel pulled Felt's hands away and looked her straight in the eye, her expression was hopeless. "Hey, come on! That's all behind us! You and me, we got our heads on *straight* now! We know what's going on here! We're going to find the Captain and work this whole thing out!"

"How, Garf?" Felt moaned. "It's just us trying to help Subaru and now he has Reinhard and the whole kingdom looking for him! Hell, the other kingdoms will probably try to help hunt him down too!"

Garfiel snorted. "The Captain against the whole fucking world? I know who I'm betting on!"

Felt actually chuckled.

Garfiel and Felt wore the brown hooded robes that Ram had provided for them during their escape. They had paid a greasy merchant who smelled like rancid pig fat to give them a ride to Abiate. The merchant was fairly surprised by

their request since few people ever wanted to go to Abiate, but it was a stop on his trip to Garkla so he agreed to transport them.

However, he had charged them the full price for a trip to the much further away Garkla.

The merchant's covered wagon contained a group of people, none of whom seemed to be interested in talking to each other.

Felt and Garfiel sat in the very back, their legs dangling out of the wagon as they watched Mirula slowly recede in the distance across the sands.

"So how long is this trip going to take?" Garfiel muttered, dragging his heel through the soft sand and leaving a line behind the wagon.

Felt thought about. "Probably a few days. This wagon doesn't move too fast."

Garfiel sighed. "Normally, I'd suggest you climb on my back and I'll just run there but the sun beats like a hammer out here."

"Yeah. We don't want to be out in that sun for long," Felt agreed.

"Get your filthy hands away from me!" A woman shouted.

Garfiel and Felt turned around and saw a woman in a brown hooded cloak standing by the driver's seat. The fat merchant with an ugly scar of his face was leering at her.

"Hey, Felt," Garfiel growled. "We're fugitives anyway. What do you say to hijacking this ride? I think smacking that merchant around would put a smile on my face."

"We shouldn't attract attention, fleabag," Felt warned him.

"I'm warning you! Hands off!" The woman shouted.

Garfiel looked at her imploringly.

Felt rolled her eyes. "Fine. Let's go and do our good deed for the decade."

Felt and Garfiel stood up and started to quickly walk up to the driver platform, stepping around other passengers who couldn't be bothered to do anything about the distressed woman.

Garfiel starting moving quickly, trying to protect the woman but before he could close the distance the woman physically picked up the extremely fat merchant and flung him twenty feet away.

The man landed on the sandy ground with a ponderous crash. The earth dragons came to a halt looking at their moaning master in confusion.

"Touch me again and I will remove your reason for wearing a loincloth!" The woman sounded more annoyed than frightened. Her hood had fallen back revealing long blond hair and ruby red eyes.

Felt stared at the woman, open mouthed. "*Priscilla?!!*" She gasped.

It was early evening when Subaru and Emilia found themselves in the mayoral palace in Kocytos.

Although this was ostensibly an emergency political summit to discuss averting a war, it had also somehow become an upscale party. Nobles and dignitaries from all over the region were in attendance.

Subaru and Emilia stuck out like sore thumbs. They had no finery to wear, nor had there been any time to locate some for them. Emilia and Subaru simply took off their robes and came to the party in their old clothes, Emilia's white dress and the clothing that Subaru had originally gotten from Reinhard.

Subaru and Emilia made no attempt to mix and mingle and their faces were stony. The locals all stared at Emilia with a mixture of wonder and fear. Subaru realized that not a few identical glances were directed at him. Some looks crossed the line into open hostility and muttered curses but no one dared approach them or say their insults too loud. Subaru and Emilia's reputation as powerful and dangerous figures was too well established for anyone to court that kind of trouble.

"How did this happen, Mili?" Subaru grumbled. "After everything that we've been through, somehow we're right back where we started: at an upscale party, murmuring vacuous pleasantries to ignorant people."

"I know," Emilia murmured. "And what's worse, everyone here is looking at us like we've caused the entire mess."

"Yeah," Subaru muttered. "If I hear the term 'Fire Witch' one more time, I think that I might punch someone."

Emilia looked at him sadly, "Welcome to my life," She murmured, taking his hand. "But at least most of the people here are ignoring us. And we need to remember that this night is important to Anri," Emilia's gaze flickered to the immaculately dressed princess as she held court out on the floor, charming and negotiating with the heads of numerous minor houses.

Anri and Radu's plan was straightforward. Ideally, she wanted to negotiate with and discourage the other great Houses from taking any hostile action against her but if that couldn't be done, she hoped to persuade a number of lesser Houses to take her side in the conflict. Anri was clearly attracting a large amount of favorable attention from various nobles. The lesser Houses viewed Ithil as a rising star in Gusteko since Anri had overthrown House Griest for all intents and purposes. They all listened intently as she proposed a new vision for Gusteko, a more open, inclusive society where trade would raise the standards of living for all.

Subaru could tell that the nobles had misgivings but they were still listening.

This is just like the royal selection announcement, Subaru thought. I know those faces. Those nobles want to believe what Anri is saying but they need some proof. Anri will need to demonstrate that she has the power to carry out her designs before they jump on the bandwagon. You'd think that winning a war against the most powerful House in Gusteko would be enough...

Emilia and I should think of some way that we can help Anri prove her influence and power.

"She seems very good at this," Emilia murmured.

Subaru chuckled. "She's certainly better than us! She's been practicing for this her whole life! We only practiced for about a month before being flung into the deep end of the pool. We had no idea *what* we were doing!"

Emilia smiled at him fondly. "I wouldn't say that. You did amazing at those parties. Everyone adored you."

Yeah, funny what magic can do, isn't it? All you need is a little witchcraft and you too can wow a nation...

Subaru sighed and stroked his chin. "Maybe we should try to do some networking ourselves before the summit actually starts," He mused. "I might be able to feel out some of the Princes," He glanced at the heads of three of the Great Houses that Radu had pointed out to him earlier. They were standing out on a balcony talking to one another.

"Subaru, don't do anything that would embarrass Anri," Emilia warned. "We don't want to make things worse."

"Worse than an impending declaration of war?" Subaru asked incredulously. "Honestly, I'd be really impressed if we *could* find a way to make things worse!"

Emilia looked unsettled. "I wouldn't put it past us!" Emilia warned.

Subaru sighed. "Thanks for the confidence booster," He muttered.

Emilia kissed him with a faint smile. "I won't be much help making nice with the Princes. I think I'll go over to Anri and see if I can play her 'tame demi-human' as a visual aid for her inclusive trade speech," Emilia murmured, walking away.

Subaru walked over to the balcony.

Before he got out there, a hulking figure in garish red armor stepped out in front of him. He had long scraggly red hair and a mouth full of misaligned teeth. "You," He growled.

This is Vlad an Voivode, Subaru thought. Radu said that this is the asshole who ordered Arlem village massacred and then tried to manipulate the two kingdoms into war. I can't be nice to him.

Then again, from what I've heard from Radu, Vlad doesn't listen to other people and he doesn't change his mind so trying to negotiate with him is a fucking waste of time anyway. I just need to get by him and focus on the Princes that I might actually reach.

"Yeah, me," Subaru said impatiently. "Got a problem with that?"

"You butchered my men at Arlem," Vlad snarled. "And you burned the better part of my army alive at the Valley of Winds!"

Subaru patted the man's shoulder with a patronizing air. He took delight in the shocked and outraged look that flickered across Vlad's face. "Wow! I've sure killed a lot of people you knew! I'm guessing that this is the part where you threaten that you're going to do something about that. I say 'threaten' because we both know that you aren't actually going to *do* anything about it. I'm pretty sure that you're a lot easier to kill than a troll or the Acolyte Knights I already fought," Subaru's voice dripped with sarcasm. "So why don't you just get lost before I decide to splatter you all across the room."

Vlad's face was bright red and he was breathing through clenched teeth. Then he walked past Subaru and stormed off.

I'm sure that somebody is going to say that I could have handled that better but I'm not so sure. Vlad looks stupid in any case. The angrier he gets, the worse his thinking will become. He might even become a millstone that his allies have to carry.

Subaru saw the other three princes standing in a row on the balcony, staring at him. As soon as they realized that Subaru was looking they all turned away and stared out over the countryside.

Subaru walked out onto the balcony.

"Evening, gentlemen," Subaru said calmly. "Lovely night, isn't it?"

Patrick turned around just to sniff at him. "I don't speak with witches," He said turning away again.

Don't get angry, Subaru told himself. *That's an in, just follow that thought.*

"You know," Subaru said in a friendly voice as he walked up to stand beside Donar. The princes glared at him but they didn't walk away. *They probably think that leaving right now would look like fleeing.* "I've been meaning to ask you guys something. Why did I get the whole 'Fire Witch' title anyway? There was no magic used on that army at all. I told the Siro's soldiers to coat the tall grass with sesame seed oil and we started the blaze with fire arrows. That's all."

Argus gave Subaru a withering look. "Do you really expect us to believe that 'sesame seed oil' burns like that?!"

"I was a little surprised by how fast it burned myself," Subaru admitted with a sigh. "I'd read about this strategy in books back home but I'd never actually seen it done. Anyway, I'm telling you the truth. I think Anri even brought the soldiers who set the trap here. They're available to testify, in case you wanted to hear from them directly."

Out of the corner of his eye, Subaru saw Donar frown.

He believes me, Subaru thought. *I'd guess that this has more to do with his own soldiers offering him some kind of corroborating testimony rather than my credibility but hey, progress is progress!*

Donar gave Subaru a chill look. "Personally, I'm less interested in *how* our men were slaughtered than in the fact that they were," Donar said flatly. "You killed thousands of good men, Subaru Natsuki."

"This was war, Prince Donar," Subaru said with a pleasant smile but he spoke just as firmly.

Donar whirled on him, flushing with rage. "They were *not* at war with you! They-"

"They were holding Princess Kairei captive," Subaru cut him off while still speaking pleasantly. "They were holding her and when we rescued her, they pursued with intent to recapture her. Is that not an act of war against the Princess? I don't know the precise relationship between Malcolm an Griest and the armies you provided but they were apparently following his orders to abduct the Princess again and that makes them soldiers in his war. Princess Kairei is a good friend of mine. I killed her enemies."

The princes were silent for a moment.

Subaru saw a flicker in Donar's eyes.

He's wavering. He knows that I'm right but he doesn't want to admit it. I suppose if someone killed hundreds of my soldiers because of a General's bad decision, I wouldn't care too much about right or wrong either.

"What are your intentions in Gusteko, Subaru Natsuki?" Argus asked.

Subaru shrugged. "I'm basically living in exile from Lagunica right now. We met Anri while she was fleeing for her life and she persuaded us to help her save her home. My fiancée and I are only here long enough to get Anri settled and go through the Grand Archives looking for a cure to a specific malady. After that, we'll likely be leaving Gusteko."

"Exile?" Patrick asked sharply.

Subaru carefully hid a smile and nodded. "The authorities in Lagunica are rather upset with my choice of bride," Subaru pointed at Emilia who stood beside Anri in the distance. "I doubt that I'll ever be able to go back there without getting executed. So, I'm currently a man without a country. I no longer have any influence in Lagunica," He said blandly.

The three digested that. "Do you intend to remain in Gusteko?" Donar asked.

"My first priority is to cure my fiancée and rescue my spirit partners who were seized by the kingdom," Subaru replied. "After that, I'm not sure where we'll wind up. Honestly, after all this, I'm pretty sick of politics. Going someplace quiet and just disappearing sounds very attractive to me."

Donar looked thoughtful while Patrick and Argus just looked skeptical.

Donar made a face and turned to the other Princes. "If this is true," He said in a tone that suggested he didn't believe it yet, "Then perhaps there could be room for an accommodation with Subaru Natsuki *and* Princess Kairei..."

"Donar!" Patrick hissed.

"If Lagunica truly does have territorial ambitions, we'll need to find a way to discourage them," Donar continued calmly. "Perhaps opening negotiations with their expatriate could be fruitful."

The others looked sullen and didn't respond.

"Is this a real summit?" Subaru asked suddenly.

The princes looked at him in confusion.

"Is this meeting a sincere effort to find common ground and establish peace, or if this all for show?" Subaru asked bluntly. "Because, if this summit is a genuine attempt to end the fighting in the north, then we should all be working together to find solutions to our problems and discourage any hostile plans that Lagunica may have."

The princes were silent for a moment. Finally Donar sighed. "I assure you, this summit is not simple window dressing. We are determined to find a way to restore peace and tranquility to Gusteko. If you are willing to work with us to that purpose, then perhaps I could be persuaded to welcome you as an ally..."

"Donar!" Patrick objected again.

Subaru nodded in satisfaction.

I might as well leave it here. I'm not going to get any further persuading them right now. Hopefully I gave Anri a bit of an opening. If Donar argues to take a 'wait and see' posture, he might sway the others.

As he was thinking, he noticed Deann and Duncan walking into the large room.

Subaru smiled at the princes. "It was nice talking to you all, excuse me, please," He said and made a beeline for Duncan and Deann.

The princes watched him depart.

"Donar," Patrick grumbled. "What was the point of any of that?! You know what we need to do and he'll never agree to it!"

Donar shrugged. "He might. He appears to have more intelligence than I gave him credit for. He might be amendable once he understands the necessity. In any case, we lose nothing by making the offer. In a perfect world, we might not need to proceed at all!"

"Donar, you're talking nonsense! Do you really believe him?!" Argus asked incredulously.

Donar made a face. "As little as I like to admit it, he makes a valid point. Our commanders were clearly in the wrong. They demanded that the princess be sent away but when Malcolm refused, they let the matter rest. At a minimum, they should have ordered their soldiers to stay out of pursuing the Princess."

"Not about that!" Argus said dismissively. "About the fire!"

"He must think us fools to claim that he burned thousands alive with salad dressing!" Patrick sniffed.

"Agreed," Argus replied. "This was witchcraft, pure and simple."

"I'm not so sure. His words align with what a survivor told me," Donar disagreed. "He claims that he saw the fire arrows and he told me that he smelled sesame seeds in the grass although he couldn't understand why at the time."

"What are you saying?" Patrick asked.

"If Subaru Natsuki is telling the truth-" Donar began.

"Even if he is telling the truth about everything he said, Donar, that doesn't solve our problems!" Patrick said sharply. "Lagunica is still threatening to attack but my sources indicate that it has nothing to do with conquest! They're willing to attack Gusteko purely to kill the witches! They consider Subaru Natsuki to be a threat to the entire world and they're willing to go to war to see him dead!"

Donar looked skeptical. "I must admit, Patrick, I have serious doubts about this. Especially in light of what you told us about Vlad's letter!"

The three princes paused a moment to scowl at Vlad an Voivode who sat sulking in a corner of the room.

"I can not believe," Donar continued. "That Lagunica is willing to go to war purely for the purpose of killing two people! Even if they are witches, that's a fantastic amount of effort for small return. To be frank, I wonder if your contact was lying to you. Perhaps this is just a fig leaf covering up Lagunica's imperial ambitions."

Patrick gave him an annoyed look but just shook his head. "I trust the source but rest assured that I received corroboration from three other contacts before proceeding with the assumption that this was true. Lagunica wants Subaru Natsuki and the other witch dead and they're prepared to do what they must to achieve that end."

"Why is Lagunica so furious with him?" Argus asked curiously. "I wasn't aware that he had committed any crimes in Lagunica to come near to competing with the massacre in the Valley of Winds."

Patrick shrugged. "My contacts all agreed that Subaru Natsuki has disrupted the 'natural order' of Lagunica. Reading between the lines, I'd say that he's a threat to the established powers-that-be in the dragon kingdom. Now they need to kill him to dishearten his large number of supporters. They even captured his spirit partners, Beatrice and Puck. Frankly, I have no trouble believing that Lagunica will attack Gusteko in order to see him dead."

"Gusteko or Siros?" Argus said sharply.

"It doesn't matter, Argus," Donar said quickly. "We can't allow Lagunica to invade Siros, even if it would serve Kairei right. If Lagunica annexes Siros it will completely isolate the kingdom. Our *only* remaining trading partner will once again be Lagunica and we'll have no choice but to reach accommodations with them under duress. We absolutely must retain access to Kararagi!"

"I agree," Patrick murmured. "The contacts I spoke to all suggested that Lagunica wished to go to war with Siros alone and was asking for our 'understanding' on this matter but I don't think that we can trust them when they claim that they have no desire to occupy Siros. Moreover, if they do conquer Siros, about three quarters of the Gusteko armies will have been destroyed over the past few months. Both Griest and Ithil will be exhausted. Lagunica could conquer the rest of Gusteko at a walk! We need to remove Lagunica's motivation for hostilities in the north."

"What if we eliminate the witches and Lagunica still finds an excuse to come north?" Donar asked.

"Personally, I think killing a pair of witches is a worthwhile action to be undertaken on its own merits," Argus snorted.

"If the witches are dead," Patrick replied, "Then we have a scapegoat for the disaster at the Valley of the Winds. That should allow the Great Houses to unify against southern aggression without losing face. We'll be outnumbered but we understand how to use the mountains and terrain to our own advantage. We can hold off Lagunica long enough for it to tire of the matter. And Vollachia will certainly become involved along Lagunica's southern border once the kingdom's attention is distracted. Lagunica's armies will be divided. We'll be able to push them back. With any luck, we can even snatch up the disputed lands and acquire some new territory!"

"Kairei may not be so eager to form an alliance with us if we kill people she considers her friends," Donar warned.

"She's not the ruler yet. Radu is," Argus replied.

"Radu is sensible and even after Kairei is crowned, she'll realize that she has no choice," Patrick continued. "My sources were unanimous. No one in Lagunica is interested in giving aid or comfort to Siros. Siros either joins with us to push back the southerners or it withers and dies alone."

"Kairei is just a girl," Argus mused. "I wonder if she's stubborn enough to stand alone rather than align with us purely out of spite."

Patrick shrugged. "That's the kind of decision that spurs open rebellions. And I can't say that I'd be sorry to see it."

Donar nodded slowly though his mouth twisted as though he had tasted something foul. "You are resolved to proceed then?"

Argus and Patrick both nodded. "They're already here," Patrick told him.

"We need your vote, Donar," Argus reminded him sternly. "This has to be unanimous if it's going to have the right optics."

Donar frowned. "Did you speak to Lady Deann?" He asked.

Argus nodded briefly. "Briefly. She's on-board but Sir Duncan absolutely demanded that Kairei and Gael be kept safe in this mess."

"Duncan has no vote in this matter," Patrick muttered.

Argus made a face. "True but all the same, we should avoid provoking Sir Duncan an Laertes. He is a *powerful* warrior. And he has vast influence over Lady Deann," He replied.

"Strange, that he should be so determined to protect them," Patrick mused.

"Not so strange," Donar disagreed. "Once upon a time, Gael and Duncan were very close. They worked together on countless adventures as apprentice Acolyte Knights. Duncan was devastated when Gael became ill. I don't doubt for a second that he'd react violently to any threat against Gael or his beloved little sister."

"He might be bluffing. Remember, he didn't stand up to Malcolm when Kairei was captured," Argus commented.

Patrick shook his head. "Donar is right, Argus. Attacking us is a very different thing than betraying the Prince that your own family owes fealty to. Malcolm might get away with murdering Kairei but I doubt that we would..."

The prince's conversation faded as they each stood there, deep in thought.

Meanwhile, Subaru walked quickly over to Duncan and Deann and stepped directly in front of them.

"Hey!" Subaru said in a friendly tone. "Duncan and Deann, right? How have you been?"

Deann's face twisted in hatred. "Get out of my way or I *will* slice you to ribbons."

Subaru chuckled. "You might find that a little harder than you think," He smiled.

"Please! Listen! I-" Anri begged.

"We have heard more than enough," Donar said dismissively.

"There is no place for a House that fosters witches in Gusteko!" Patrick agreed.

Emilia bit her lip and looked at Subaru desperately. Subaru seemed oddly calm.

"This is not the place! This matter should be brought before the Holy King and the Hierocracy!" Radu reminded them in a grim voice.

"We're not waiting years for Gilecomgain to die and a new Holy King to be elected to resolve this matter," Argus growled. "The witches will be given over to us or your House will be made extinct. No root or seed will escape this cleansing. They'll be no coming back from that!"

"All in favor of declaring war against Siros unless the witches are surrendered to us for immediate execution?" Donar demanded.

"Aye!" The Princes all said in unison.

Anri looked at Subaru and Emilia in horror. Her eyes started darting everywhere like a trapped animal looking for escape.

"Subaru!" Emilia hissed, tugging on his sleeve. "What do we do?!"

Subaru smirked.

"And against?" Donar added carelessly.

"Nay," Deann said firmly.

Donar opened his mouth to continue, the objection was so unexpected that he was badly thrown off step.

The Princes all stared at Deann.

"What?! Have you gone daft, girl?!" Argus demanded.

It was only now that the other Princes actually looked at Deann. Her eyes were wide with horror and her body was trembling. Even Duncan seemed badly shaken.

"For a long list of personal and political reasons," Deann said in an unsteady voice. "I do not wish to set this precedent. Only the Holy King and the Hierocracy have the right to declare someone guilty of witchcraft. I request that this matter be placed before the Hierocracy so that we may follow the proper procedures."

Argus looked astonished then angry. "What is this?! Did you work out some deal to free your father?!" He demanded looking at Anri accusingly.

However, Anri and Radu looked just as shocked as the rest by Deann's unexpected declaration of support.

"That's two votes for acquittal!" Radu said sharply, his face baffled. The regent was looking at everyone, desperately trying to understand what was going on.

"It doesn't matter," Donar said calmly. "Deann has no influence in Sanshi. Those reprobates would never accept a woman on the throne under *any* circumstances. Since Deann has no claim to the throne then we will simply treat House Griest as not in attendance and therefore abstaining. That means that the matter was passed by acclamation."

Radu looked outraged. "How many more rules do you intend to break to get your way?!" Radu snapped.

Deann's terrified face hardened and she got to her feet, drawing her twin short swords. "Make no mistake, gentlemen. I *am* here. I have a voice and I will be heard. Anyone who wishes to dismiss me as a 'mere woman' will do so with a yard of steel through his ribs!"

Duncan put his hand on his heavy flanged mace.

"Lady Deann!" Vlad snarled. "Do you know what you're doing?!"

"It's no matter," Argus said dismissively. He whistled.

The doors on both side of the council room opened and soldiers began to pour in. At the lead was a tall, handsome man in a knight's tabard with a long slender sword belted at his waist. The man had long blond hair that looked like he spent a great deal of time combing it and his expression was smugly superior. He was surrounded by ten elderly men in long black robes who seemed reminiscent of priests. Behind them were dozens of soldiers.

"Gilbert de Ray," Anri whispered, her face white as chalk.

"Who's this guy?" Subaru growled.

Emilia summoned her ice sword.

"He... He's the tenth of the Acolyte Knights in Gusteko," Anri said in an unsteady voice. "He leads... the witch hunters..."

Subaru looked at the knight and his face twisted in rage. "Witch hunters?!" He snarled.

Gilbert made a gesture.

The priests beside him bowed their heads and began to chant. A veritable swarm of spirits began to whirl around them, bright as stars.

Emilia gasped and her sword fell from nerveless fingers, shattering against the floor.

Thin purple chains appeared out of nowhere and quickly bound the arms and legs of everyone in the room except for Gilbert and his priests and soldiers. Even the Princes were bound in chains and they looked very angry about that.

"Seal Evil," Gilbert said carelessly. "The ultimate power of the spirit arts. So long as my priests continue to commune with their spirits, all magic within the area is rendered void. Every person within is trapped by mystic chains to be dealt with as I see fit. It even disables the filthy Authority of a witch."

Subaru's face darkened. He briefly stepped in and out of *Reason and Judgment*. "Buddy, I happen to know for a fact that this isn't true," Subaru snarled.

Gilbert smirked. "We're not like you southern lizard worshipers. We know how to deal with witches in Gusteko. The witch will be burned immediately as will anyone foolish enough to attempt to defend her."

Anri tried to leap to her feet to shield Emilia but the chains held her back.

"Burned?!" Subaru hissed.

"Under my leadership," Gilbert said smugly. "The Hunters have greatly increased the number of witches we've dealt with. Since I took command last year, our unit has personally burned over thirteen Witches! One more will make it a very good day in the cause of protecting Gustekan purity!"

The soldiers murmured their agreement.

Subaru seethed. *You have no idea how to deal with Witches! Beatrice told me that there hasn't been a real Witch in four hundred years! And even if there had been, was there ever a Witch so feeble that a group of ordinary soldiers could have captured her?!*

Whatever spell you're using to suppress magic, I can tell you right now it doesn't work on Authorities. The fact that you don't know that means that you've never even encountered a real Archbishop, much less a real Witch!

All you've been doing was condemning innocent people that you don't like to the flames!

"You won't be doing that," Subaru said in a deathly whisper.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and shattered the chains that bound him with one quick jerk.

Gilbert actually looked slightly impressed. "You must be the famous Subaru Natsuki, Butcher of Arlem and the Fire Witch."

"Give me another minute and I'm going to add 'Killer of Witch Hunters' to my resume," Subaru hissed.

Gilbert laughed. "I've heard all about your much tauted 'invincibility.' You won't be the first man with an impressive title to fall at my blade," He drew his sword.

Subaru scowled at him. "Do you have any idea how many arrogant bullies have begged for mercy after facing me?"

Gilbert yawned. "Don't try my patience any further, Subaru Natsuki. The number of people in this room who will die goes up with every word that you say."

Emilia was crying. She struggled to get to her feet but the magical chains restrained her. "Alright! If I surrender to you, will you promise-"

"Enough of this foolishness," Subaru said in a chill voice. Subaru had reached a breaking point. The days of short sleep, the stress, the struggle, and doubts, the frustrations with Emilia curse, it all piled up on him.

I can't... I just can't take any more...

The Authority flickered to life deep inside of him.

Subaru grabbed Deann and Duncan's chains. He triggered *Indomitable* and shattered them, deliberately leaving Emilia, Anri, and Radu still bound in magical chains.

"Deann, take Emilia, Anri, and her Uncle out of here. Go and wait where we discussed," Subaru commanded.

A moment passed and Subaru realized that she wasn't moving. Deann was staring at Subaru, her whole body trembling.

Subaru fixed her with a murderous gaze. "Do not forget yourself, Deann!" Subaru said coldly. "Remember what I *told* you..." He said in a warning tone.

Deann flinched and jerked into action. Duncan quickly leaped to his lady's aid. Duncan grabbed Emilia and Radu and carried them from the room on his shoulders while Deann picked up Anri and ran for the door.

Gilbert moved to pursue but Subaru held out a protective hand and Gilbert grimaced. "It seems that I'll have to deal with you before I take care of your whore."

"Indeed. That is the way things will be," Subaru agreed quietly.

"Subaru!" Emilia screamed, struggling helplessly in her chains.

The door slammed shut behind her, trapping Subaru in the room with Gilbert, his soldiers and the princes.

The soldiers began creeping closer to him, most of their faces set and grim but a few were grinning. Subaru was a more

dangerous foe than the witch hunters usually faced but that just meant more excitement when he was finally dragged screaming to the fires.

"You're really prepared to sacrifice your life for that half-devil witch. You are truly bewitched, aren't you," Gilbert mused. "How sad. If you were better at recognizing witches perhaps you would have escaped this end."

Subaru stared at Gilbert. Then he started to laugh. It was a deep, cold laugh that rang off the rafters and filled the room. The soldiers hesitated, looking at each other uncomfortably. Gilbert's eyes narrowed slightly.

Yes. Let's do it. Let's do it now. Emilia and my paths will finally be joined forever and whatever happens to one happens to both.

"I could say the same to you, Gilbert," Subaru smirked. "If you'd been any better at recognizing witches, you might have avoided your fate. Because Emilia *isn't* the Witch of Pride."

Gilbert frowned.

Subaru's face filled with savage glee as he shouted out. "I am!"

The room was dead silent as everyone stared at Subaru in shock and horror.

Subaru felt nothing but exaltation.

Yes. This is what I really am! Subaru Natsuki, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Behold my power, you mortal fools, and despair!

Deep inside of Subaru, the Authority of Pride surged, flaring up like a newborn star as it fed on the rapture that felt Subaru having finally declared himself openly. The power grew and grew and this time it swallowed him whole. Subaru didn't even try to resist.

The power flowed through his body and it was glorious. Subaru wouldn't have been surprised if his body was shining like the sun.

Gilbert gave Subaru an incredulous look. "Do you expect us to believe that?" Gilbert grated in contempt. "Don't misunderstand me, if you want to burn with your witch, it can certainly be arranged but this fantasy of yours is ridiculous."

"The truth is often seen as impossible," Subaru replied, feeling nothing but amusement and a distant sort of pity for Gilbert. "Especially by the foolish."

Gilbert's jaw dropped.

One of the junior officers standing near Gilbert drew a light sword. The officer's face turned red and twisted in fury. "Die, you Witch worshipping freak!"

The officer lunged at the seemingly unarmed Subaru. Two of his men charged beside them.

"Stop!" Gilbert roared at the impetuous officer. "Stand your ground!"

The junior officer was too enraged to listen and he closed the distance.

Under the Authority's power, everything around Subaru seemed to be happening in slow motion. He watched with a meditative detachment as the officer and his men charged.

This man is unworthy of my time. His form is truly dreadful. He's overextended, his elbow joint is locked and this leaves him no opportunity to adjust. An amateur mistake.

I feel genuinely slighted by this. The Princes of Gusteko clearly knew that I was present and that I would be their opposition in this matter.

These are my foes? This is the greatest challenge that Gusteko could provide? How dare they send against me anything less than Witches or dragons?

As the officer's sword approached Subaru's face, he tilted his head imperceptibly to the left. A difference of just a few millimeters. A small change but enough to ensure that instead of driving his sword point through Subaru's eyes, the officer hit nothing but air.

The officer's face twisted from blind fury to comical surprise as he completely missed his target.

Subaru reached up with his right hand and caught the officer's forearm in a gentle grip. Before the officer could react, Subaru brought up his left fist and smashed it against the officer's locked elbow joint as hard as he could.

The bone snapped with a sound like a broken cracker.

The slender sword fell from nerveless fingers as the officer slowly opened his mouth to cry out.

Subaru caught the falling sword in his right hand and, in one smooth motion, ran its edge across the officer's throat with a flourish.

In slow motion, Subaru watched as a great fountain of blood leaped from the man's neck and then drifted to the ground.

The officer convulsively reached his hands up to the ruins of his neck as he fell to his knees, unaware that he was already dead.

Subaru eyes the other two soldiers who were still charging at him. Their commander's death had happened too suddenly for their minds to process.

At the very least, these men are wearing armor and full helmets. I approve of men who make their just execution at my hand something slightly more than trivial.

Even had they time to strategize, I doubt not that they would conclude they had little to fear from me. Even now that I am armed, a light sword such as this is no defense against a suit of armor.

Ordinarily.

Their armor doesn't fit very well. These soldiers were given castoff gear.

It is no shame to fall against me in combat. It is completely expected that one should fail in any challenge issued to his clear superior. However, it is only right that two gentlemen warriors should meet in respectful combat to test their mettle ere I slay them.

These men, by their weakness and foolishness, have made it impossible for my august self to respect them and in so doing they have cheated me of any satisfaction in this contest.

They will suffer the weight of my displeasure for this affront.

As the first soldier closed the distance, Subaru gently tossed his sword in the air and caught it backhanded so that the blade now pointed behind him.

The soldier's helmet concealed everything but his eyes. Through the visor, Subaru saw them narrow in confusion.

Subaru raised his sword hilt and smashed it against the soldier's helmeted cheek as hard as he could.

The helmet spun to the left with a loud snapping sound, almost certainly breaking the soldier's nose and blinding him by shifting his visor. The soldier tried to skid to a stop and the other soldier crashed into him from behind. The front soldier's back arched, the impact quite possibly chipping a vertebrae and causing his breastplate to ride up.

With an expression of disdain, Subaru's backhanded sword flicked out and ripped the soldier's belly wide open.

As the two soldiers fell on top of each other, Subaru's blade lanced down into the second soldier's now exposed back and neatly punctured his kidneys.

Subaru spared them a brief glance. The pair were screaming and whimpering. Both men were dead, it was just a question of when. Subaru dismissed them from thought.

The soldiers recoiled in shock.

From their perspective, an unarmed Subaru had effortlessly disarmed and killed three professional soldiers in seconds without even dirtying his clothes or breaking his stride.

The soldiers shrank back in a clump.

The Princes, still wrapped in magical chains, renewed their struggles to break free.

"Could it be true?!"

"Is he really a witch?!"

A few soldiers panicked and made a break for the door but Subaru raised his hand and closed his fist. The heavy door swung ponderously shut. The soldiers beat on the door but it wouldn't budge.

"Your manners leave much to be desired," Subaru mused. "In my homeland, turning your back on your superior is the height of disrespect."

"Gather your magic!" Gilbert shouted at the priests that surrounded him. "Infuse me with all your strength!" They each extended their hands and the small shining orbs spun around their wrists as the priests and Gilbert called upon the spirits.

"My compliments," Subaru offered. "Victory is unimaginably far from your reach but if you all attacked me at once we might at the very least have a praiseworthy battle."

Gilbert seethed. "I am one of the strongest men in this world! You will learn how foolish it was of you to challenge me! Fell Goa!"

"Pridebreaker," Subaru said negligently.

Gilbert and his priests fell to their knees with a gasp as their spirits shot away to make a shining crown above Subaru's head. Subaru was surrounded by dozens of spirits and he shone like a star.

"What have you done?!" Gilbert screamed as he got to his feet.

Subaru waved his hand wearily. "Will you please at least be judicious with your nonsense? Your men had the audacity to attempt to lay hands on the most exalted existence ever to stride upon this feeble world. Your actions would earn my offense if they were not so inept as to win my amusement." Subaru paused and, being filled with a truly remarkable kind of charity, he attempted to make them understand. "Have any of you ever contemplated the meaninglessness of your transitory lives? You have all grown upon this tiny world like lichens upon the stone, paper-thin in your fragility and lasting little more than a season. Whether men consider you great or small, the stone is left unmarked and incognizant of your mayfly existence.

"Rejoice, one and all, for today your eyes have finally been opened to the truth. You have all beheld my transcendental presence and now understand what it means to encounter an emissary of the very Heavens that lay so far above you. I did not grow upon the stone, I *am* the stone. I am this world and so much more besides. This world and I are forever one, married under the auspices of heaven, her hand surrendered to my loving custody in the certitude that no man imaginable could tend to her needs with greater wisdom.

"All great men are well suited to their callings, are we not? I am your Redeemer by trade and your Redeemer by nature. It would not be unfit for each of you to offer your most humble gratitude that it is I and no lesser man, possessed of lesser understanding and judgment, who stands before you to lay down justice in this matter," Subaru broadly hinted.

Subaru paused a moment. "I trust that this observation will not reduce nor diminish the earnestness of your abasement and offerings. Obviously, such matters are more properly left unsaid, had any of you the wit to understand the proper conventions and courtesies, but I am a lord among lords and my charity and benevolence know no bounds. Therefore, I shall extend my patience to you knaves who naturally possess no more wit nor understanding than you were born with. In my unspeakable magnificence, I offer you the chance to learn and to grow from my exalted example even if such growth is sadly restricted to your own lamentable natural limitations."

The soldiers looked flabbergasted by Subaru's dense speech, unable to even parse it. Gilbert staggered for a moment and then his face twisted in hatred. "I'll give you a single chance, Subaru Natsuki. Give the witch to me or you'll burn with her. And so will your gutter-born princess! How much are you willing to give up for a half devil?!"

Too fast for the knight to even process, Subaru had darted across the room and seized him by his throat. Subaru lifted the struggling knight high off the floor with one hand. Gilbert convulsively dropped his blade as he desperately tried to pry Subaru's hands off his throat. His soldiers and priests stumbled away from Subaru in terror.

Subaru was angry. Beyond angry. Subaru was enraged and like everything else about him, his rage was as profound and inexorable as the incoming tide. His rage was such that hurricanes and tidal waves would stop instantly to pay heed to it.

"Give her up?" Subaru whispered as if ensuring that he'd heard Gilbert right. "Give her to *you*?"

Gilbert's face was turning blue as he struggled pointlessly in Subaru's grip. He beat heavy blows on Subaru's wrist that bounced off his skin like raindrops.

Subaru's face was cold. "I confess myself humbled," Subaru said with faint surprise. "My remarkable equanimity has been disrupted! My boundless benefice has been exhausted! Such an act is truly remarkable as your offenses have indeed exceeded my well-reasoned expectations, albeit this is neither laudatory nor forgivable. You and your people, who up until now had been safely adrift in the sheltered harbor of my patience, are now at the mercy of the boundless sea of my wrath, a great tumultuous expanse filled with dangers unforeseeable and mysteries unexplainable."

Gilbert gasped for breath.

Subaru scowled up into Gilbert's face. His rage consumed him. "Understand one thing, fool, and understand it as a surpassing truth from which all other incontrovertible facts and natural laws can be measured," He hissed.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I will *never* give her up," He whispered through clenched teeth. "Not to *anyone*! Not a lock of her hair, not a word from her lips, not a *single* moment of her attention will I *ever* yield to another!" Subaru ended with a roar. "Emilia is *mine*, do you hear me?! Mine! And I will *never* suffer another to have her!"

There was a terrible cracking sound and Gilbert's head fell back, dangling down his shoulders at an unnatural angle.

Subaru scowled down at the lifeless body and dropped it. Subaru took a deep, ragged breath. "I was not finished chastising you. And yet, there you lie, broken. You broke without orders, without leave... This was most ungenerous of you..."

Gilbert was dead but Subaru's anger was unsatisfied. His rage boiled up upside of him and he whirled on the princes and soldiers.

The princes remained chained in their seats, their eyes as big as hen's eggs and the soldiers trembled against the sealed doors.

"You are betrayers," Subaru murmured, "This was never a real peace summit, it was simply a trap. You lured my exalted self and my friends here under false pretenses. Now you will suffer the consequences."

Argus and Donar renewed their struggles against the magic chains as Subaru slowly approached them. Patrick took a deep breath. "You should think carefully before you act if you care anything at all about Beatrice and Puck!"

Subaru froze in his tracks. "What did you just say?" He asked in a deadly whisper.

"Your spirit companions," Patrick said calmly. He gave Subaru a sly smirk. "You didn't *really* expect me to go up against a witch without some kind of insurance, did you? My men captured your spirits a few days ago. If the four of us don't escape this place intact, my men know exactly what to do to your spirits..."

Subaru was silent for a long moment. "You're lying," He hissed. "You're trying to buy time. Trying to make a *fool* of me..."

Subaru clenched his fist around the sword that he held and the princes watched in shock as the hilt crumpled in his hand. He dropped the sword a moment later and what was left of the metal hilt looked like aluminum foil.

"I assure you, it's all true," Patrick said smugly.

Subaru took a deep breath and then let it out very slowly. "Very well," He said calmly but his rages blazes, "Since you're feeling so creative, I'll indulge your story. How did you locate them?"

"I have many connections with the Lagunica government. Getting them to turn the spirits over to my custody wasn't all that challenging. And with those Evil Sealing Stone bracelets on their arms, they were helpless," Patrick said with a smile.

"You're lying," Subaru said in a cold voice. "You did not know that I was the witch before you entered this chamber. Your story is laughable."

"You're right!" Patrick said quickly. "I didn't know originally! I was trying to get leverage over you to keep you out of the fight while we killed the elf girl!"

Subaru's eyes blazed and he scowled at Patrick, seemingly ready to rip him apart with his teeth.

"-But then the spirits told me! They told me who the real witch was!" Patrick hurried to add.

Subaru glowered at him. "Another pathetic lie," Subaru grated, "They would never have betrayed me. Never. They would have never told you that..."

"I have proof! Look in my shirt pocket!" Patrick said.

Subaru scowled for a long moment. Then he marched over to Patrick and felt around in his breast pocket until he pulled out a small pink ribbon, such as a girl might use for her hair.

"I'm always prepared for contingencies," Patrick smirked. "That's why I've lived so long."

Subaru stood there, gasping for breath as he struggled to control his overwhelming fury. He cradled the ribbon gently in his hands but his face was contorted with savage rage.

"I took that from her. It was a little insurance, just in case you didn't believe me," Patrick explained.

"You took this from her?" Subaru whispered.

Patrick nodded.

"Then you've seen them."

"Naturally."

"What do they look like?" Subaru grated.

Patrick smiled. "A small gray cat and a beautiful young girl in an elaborate, red and pink dress." He paused. "They miss you, you know," He added.

"They said that?" Subaru whispered, his face beet red with suppressed rage.

Patrick nodded.

"What else did they say?" Subaru asked.

"Not much, honestly. I got the impression that they don't really like me very much," Patrick shrugged.

Subaru's eyes narrowed. "You spoke to her then. What did she say? Repeat her *exact* words."

Patrick thought for a moment. "All I could get her to say was 'Puck and I miss Subaru.'"

Subaru stared at him.

Patrick fought not to blink.

Subaru's eyes glittering. "'I,'" He whispered with dangerous calm. "'Puck' and 'I', miss Subaru?" He asked, as if just seeking confirmation.

"That's what she said," Patrick replied. "If you harm any of us, I promise you that you'll never see them again. Set us free, and perhaps we can negotiate for their freedom."

Subaru stared at Patrick for a long moment.

Patrick held his breath.

Finally, Subaru began to laugh. It was a high cold laugh that echoed off the rafters and chilled the hearts of his listeners.

Subaru smirked at the princes. "I confess, I was truly frightened for a moment," Subaru said conversationally. "But when I stop to think about it logically, your story didn't hold up from the start."

Subaru's looked at the ribbon with disdain and he dropped it on the ground.

"Wait! I-" Patrick began.

Subaru's face twisted in fury. "You, *scum!* All of you!" Subaru roared at the princes. The men recoiled as if the words had been a blow. Subaru had truly lost control now. His eyes were wild and his fists were clenched tight enough to draw blood from his own palms. "You lied to me! Luring my Emilia here and intending to do her harm! To take her away from me! And then... you *taunt* me. With false words from a sweet girl you never met! Telling me fables about my precious Beatrice! An *insult* to the bond we share! Your filthy mouths dirty her name when you speak it! *I'll kill you!*" He roared in a voice that shook the building.

Subaru's world went dark.

When Subaru regained consciousness, he found himself lying flat on the council room floor. His head was spinning and the Authority had returned to dormancy.

He managed to get to his feet and looked around in shock.

The meeting room looked like the site of an inferno. Bodies lay everywhere, charred to the bone. Skulls gaped all around Subaru in soundless screams. Even the bones themselves were blackened in some cases and the soldiers' metal armor was distorted as if it had briefly liquefied due to great heat.

There were huge dents in the stone walls. It looked as though bodies had been flung against the walls with enough force to break the hard stone.

Subaru looked around with wide eyes. "What the fuck did I do?!" He whispered in astonishment. "*How* did I do this?!"

It appeared that Subaru hadn't been unconscious for very long.

Subaru left the mayoral palace without much effort. Because he had killed everyone involved, no one in town knew that a massacre had even taken place.

Subaru had walked to the edge of town before the alarm was sounded. Subaru heard the horns and bells echoing through the dark city but he kept walking calmly to the grove by the pond just outside of town where he'd already told Deann and Duncan to await him if something unexpected had happened during the summit.

Subaru entered the glade with a sheepish look on his face. Duncan and Deann were standing there, struggling to break the chains around Anri without success. Radu and Emilia sat chained nearby.

"Deann! *Why* are you helping me?!" Anri demanded, sounding as if she'd asked this question many times before.

Deann ground her teeth. "Look! I have my reasons!" Deann snapped.

"Anri, perhaps we shouldn't be focusing on that right now," Radu murmured.

Emilia's eyes brightened. "Subaru!"

Deann and Duncan jumped and spun around. They stared at Subaru with huge eyes and both laid their hands on their weapons.

"How in the world did you get out of there alive?!" Radu asked in disbelief.

Subaru sighed as he grabbed all their chains and triggered *Indomitable*. "Well, I... apparently killed... pretty much everybody there so there wasn't really anyone left to stop me from leaving," He murmured, breaking their chains.

"Are you alright?!" Emilia demanded, throwing her arms around him.

Subaru sighed. "Well, I've had better days," He admitted.

Emilia led his head to her shoulder and held him tight.

"What do you mean, you killed 'everyone?'" Radu asked intently as he threw off his chains.

"Um. Well I killed the Witch Hunters, the soldiers, that knight, and those annoying princes," Subaru said awkwardly.

"You killed the princes?!" Anri gasped.

"Yeah," He muttered. "That should at least give you guys a break for a bit. I doubt that their Houses will want to get involved again. They've seen the penalty for trying to attack you."

Anri shook her head violently, staring at Subaru in disbelief.

"Subaru Natsuki," Radu whispered. "Do you realize what you've *done*?!"

Subaru and Emilia frowned at him in confusion.

"You killed the heads of four houses!" Radu shouted incredulously. "Their families will now feel like they have no choice but to take revenge against House Ithil!"

Subaru blinked.

"Oh Gods," Anri whispered in horror. "How could this have happened?! Subaru, how could you have been so stupid?! How did we go from being finally at peace yesterday to being on the verge of going to war with everybody today!"

"Hang on!" Subaru said desperately. "There's no... evidence that you were involved in that! You have witnesses saying that you weren't there!"

"Do you really think anyone will believe that?!" Radu asked scathingly.

Subaru's face twisted in dismay as he thought about it.

Emilia looked at the frantic Anri and sighed. "Then just blame us," Emilia said simply. "Tell everyone that the Witch Hunters freed you from our spell and that we killed everyone in the room in retaliation."

Anri stared at Emilia in shock. "Emilia! I can't-"

"She's right," Subaru sighed. He suddenly felt terribly tired. "This mess is all our fault. The best thing that you can do is to give us all the blame."

Anri gave Subaru a hard look but she didn't say anything.

"Gods," Radu whispered urgently to no one. "What are we going to do?! Siros doesn't have the strength to oppose Hilde, Brokvar, Craite, and Voivode all at the same time!"

Subaru gave Deann an imperious look and she blanched.

"Griest will stand with you," Deann said quickly. "We're eager to establish a solid alliance with House Ithil and to stand with you against all foes," She promised. "Between us we control the strongest armies in Gusteko. The other Houses would be foolish to attack!"

Anri looked at her incredulously.

Deann sighed, suddenly looking exhausted. "Although, I would like to see my father freed, once the alliance is solidified," She added.

Radu looked puzzled but he nodded slowly. "I won't turn down any help in this mess. Gusteko is about to experience a real civil war. We'll need to make alliances with all the uncommitted houses."

There was a stirring in the bushes. Deann drew her swords but it was only a boy leading four riding dragons into the glade.

Duncan took the reins from the boy and he vanished back into the forest. "I sent word that we would need mounts," Duncan explained. "We need to get out of here. It won't take long until they come out looking for us."

Subaru nodded. "Yeah, Anri. You better go."

Anri bit her lip. "But what about you two?"

"We need to sneak back into town," Subaru said. "Patrasche is still in that stable and we need to rescue her. Anyway, that will probably provide a good diversion for you."

"And after that?" Anri asked with a small catch in her voice.

"Anri," Radu said firmly. "After all this, you *cannot* be thinking of granting them sanctuary! Not only have they embroiled our people in another war, one that we may not win, but your only chance of courting the neutral houses is to denounce them and pin all the blame on these wretches immediately!"

Anri flinched.

Subaru sighed. "He's right, Anri. Just give us all the blame. We're used to it. Hell, in this case I totally deserve it and we won't be in Gusteko to suffer for it anyway."

"Where are you going? Are you going back to-" Anri glanced at Radu's hard face and clammed up.

Emilia and Subaru looked at each other helplessly. "I don't know," Subaru said. "I don't know where we're going to go or where we'll end up. But we'll be OK! As long as we're together, we can do anything."

Emilia nodded, hugging Anri. "We'll try to send you a letter when we're somewhere safe," She whispered, holding the girl tightly in her arms.

Subaru hugged her next. "Be careful, Anri. Take care of yourself. We'll be back to help you out of this mess... just as soon as we figure out how..." He added lamely.

"Don't you think you've done enough at this point?!" Radu asked sharply.

Subaru flinched.

Subaru thought for a long moment. "Anri," Subaru muttered, "Come here for a second."

Anri walked over as Radu, Duncan, and Deann discussed their escape. Anri looked at Subaru as if she was no longer certain how to feel about him.

"Here, Anri. You'll need this," Subaru whispered, handing her the Gospel.

Anri jumped. "But you'll need it!"

Subaru shook his head. "I haven't found it too useful. Maybe we just don't have the talent for reading it. You need it more than we will."

Emilia nodded fervently.

Anri slowly opened the book and then flinched and slammed it shut. "I can't read it!" She whispered. "I must have lost the witch's blessing somehow!"

"Oh, fuck," Subaru sighed and grabbed the Gospel. "OK... 'Book.' Listen," He hissed, feeling unbelievably silly. "You're *my* Gospel and I am giving you to Anri. I... need Siros to be strong and prosperous and at peace for my... 'goals' to be fulfilled so you are going to guide Anri to make all that happen. Understood?"

The Book shuddered in his hand for a moment and Subaru gave it back to Anri.

She opened it doubtfully and her eyes brightened. "I can read it again! It says '*The King of Pride will be visited by three witches. Each will offer him his destiny. One once pretended to love him. One was made to love him. And one knows he can offer her love. One will deceive him, one will use him, and one will consume him. The deceiver will never lie to him, the manipulator will never tell him the truth, and the one who would take all from him, will give him everything.*'"

The three looked at each other in confusion.

Subaru shook his head. "You need to get going, Anri," Subaru muttered.

Anri bit her lip. "Subaru, Emilia," She began. "I-"

"There's no time, Anri," Emilia said sadly. "You need to get out of here."

Subaru nodded. "Save it for the next time we see you."

Anri nodded seriously and threw her arms around both of them. "We'll be together again," She said firmly. "I promise!"

"Promises are important," Emilia said.

"And I must keep my promises," Subaru finished.

Anri pulled away and mounted her dragon.

Subaru wiped a tear from his eye. "Alright! You all get out of here! We'll distract the locals!"

Anri, Duncan, and Deann nodded while Radu just glared down at them with a stony expression. They kicked their dragons into a sprint. Anri stared back longingly until they vanished into the darkness.

"We need to get going too, Mili," Subaru said.

Emilia nodded.

Although the city was in an uproar, the pair had little trouble sneaking back into town. The city guards were busy turning the place upside down, looking for enemies and ensuring that nobody left. They were broadly indifferent to anyone foolish enough to enter.

Subaru and Emilia entered the stable and Patrasche's head quickly poked over the stall door with a delighted cluck.

"Hey, girl," Subaru said, stroking her head. "Did you miss us?"

Patrasche closed her eyes with a contented expression.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered. "Now that we found Patrasche, how are we going to get out of the city?"

Subaru shrugged as he opened the pen door. "Honestly, I'm leaning toward brute force."

"What?"

Subaru chuckled. "There's nobody in the city guard who could be a threat to us and we promised Anri that we'd give her

a diversion. If we just break through the perimeter, all the guards will come chasing after us instead of looking for Anri."

Emilia frowned. "Subaru, those guards are innocent people. It's not OK to just kill them unless we have literally no other choice!" She said firmly.

"Who said anything about killing them?" Subaru replied as they led Patrasche out of the stable. "After all, dead men don't sound alarms or tell everybody which way we went. We don't need to kill anybody, just scare them. Then they'll come after us and leave Anri alone."

Emilia thought about it. "OK, that makes sense. I'll freeze them to the ground then. It won't hurt them much but it will let us ride past them and they'll sound an alarm."

"Great plan!" Subaru approved, climbing onto Patrasche.

It was well after midnight when Subaru and Emilia rode Patrasche back to the Elixir forest. The dragon, who had slept most of the afternoon and evening, was still doing fine but her riders were exhausted.

"Subaru, they're still following us!" Emilia whispered wearily, her head slumped against Subaru's shoulder. The shouts of pursuing soldiers on riding dragons could be heard close by.

"This is all good news," Subaru said to Emilia.

"It is?" She said in surprise.

"Yeah. If they're this fixated on us, that means that Anri got away clean!"

Emilia thought a moment then nodded. "That is good news. But now we have to get away!"

"Shouldn't be an issue," Subaru replied as they finally rode under the forest trees. "They'll turn back pretty soon."

"I see them!" A voice shouted.

Subaru and Emilia spun around and saw a man mounted on a riding dragon, waving his torch overhead to signal the others.

Patrasche kept running but there was the rumbling sound of dozens of dragons converging.

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted. "They found us!"

To her astonishment, Subaru laughed. "This is perfect timing!"

"What-"

"Just hang on, Mili!" Subaru said with barely contained laughter.

Emilia stared at Subaru incredulously.

Emilia looked behind them and saw at least forty riders coming fast through the forest. They were clearly visible under their burning torches and they were closing in.

As Emilia watched, a black silhouette against the torch light knocked the lead dragon over. The dragon and its rider foundered in the snow. There was a terrible roar.

More silhouettes began to pounce on the other dragons. The dragons screamed in terror and began to bolt out of the forest. Emilia watched as the foundered dragons quickly regained their feet and followed, slowly pursued by the torch bearing men who'd fallen off. Packs of Guiltlowe and wolgarms pursued them.

Emilia realized that Patrasche had stopped running and that Subaru was roaring with laughter.

Emilia looked with deep frustration at the love of her life. "Subaru," She growled in annoyance.

Subaru slowly got control of his laughter. "I gathered the mabeasts to this area when we got close to the forest. I figured this would be enough to school them against coming into the forest until they could gather a *really* large force. We'll be safe for a day or two now."

"Why didn't you tell me about that plan?!" Emilia demanded.

Subaru smirked. "Well, for one thing, you look awfully cute when you're surprised."

Emilia glowered at him then sighed and let it go. She thought for a moment. "Subaru... what if they search the forest and find the village?"

Subaru sighed and then rode Patrasche forward at a walk. "They won't, Mili," He said, trying to sound confident. "It would take a whole army weeks to search this forest. Nobody is going to order their whole army to search the Elixir Forest for weeks on end unless they think that they'll get something out of it." He sighed. "For good and for bad, Gusteko has much bigger problems on its hands right now than... a couple of fugitive witches."

Emilia listened to the terrified screams of the men receding in the distance.

"The mabeasts seem to be having some trouble catching them," Emilia murmured.

Subaru shook his head. "I ordered the mabeasts to chase them but not to kill them unless they tried to stand and fight. And no, I have absolutely no idea *how* I was able to convey that message but it seems like they listened."

Emilia nodded. "It's good that you didn't kill them, Subaru."

Subaru sighed. "I figure that I owe them that much, considering how many innocent Gusteko soldiers I *have* killed in the past week. Not to mention the very real possibility that I've set their entire country on a collision course for a civil war..."

"Subaru, that wasn't your fault," Emilia murmured.

"Really?" Subaru asked incredulously. "How the hell can you justify that?"

Emilia didn't answer.

Subaru sighed. "Yeah. That's what I thought."

Subaru and Emilia rode less than another mile before stopping for the night. They weren't going to get anywhere near the village for hours and they were too tired to go that far.

They found a likely camp spot and gave Patrasche food. Emilia used her magic to melt the snow for some water. Patrasche fell asleep almost as soon as she'd finished eating.

Subaru pulled their new tent out of the saddlebag. "OK, let's see if we can set this thing up."

It took an exhausted Subaru and Emilia close to an hour to figure out how to set up the tent but they finally got it together and sat down inside.

"Wow," Emilia said in wonder. "This really *is* comfortable!"

Subaru was probably even more amazed. Emilia could use her mana to stay warm but Subaru had to rely on shivering and Emilia's body heat. Inside the tent it felt like a warm summer morning. Subaru curiously stuck his hand out of the still open tent door, feeling his fingers freeze in the chilly night air while the rest of his arm was warm and balmy. Even the tent floor was comfortable. It felt more as if they were sitting on a soft mattress than a thin layer of cloth against the hard, snow-packed ground.

Subaru grabbed some of the last vegetables that they'd packed in the saddlebag and shared them with Emilia. Neither one had the energy to cook so they ate them raw.

"Subaru, what's that?" Emilia asked, pointed at a small metal cylinder a little bigger than a waste basket that sat outside the tent. Upper cylinder had a door in the side.

"Oh, shit. I always hate it when I put something together and I have parts left over," Subaru muttered. He squinted at it. "I think that's the kiln. It lets us make a fire inside the tent," Subaru answered.

"Want to try it?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged. He stepped outside to grab the kiln and brought it in the tent. He opened it and inside he found a small bag of polished blue balls a little smaller than marbles. The bag was labeled 'Fire Stones.'

"Mili, do you have any idea what these are?" Subaru asked, inspecting the balls.

Emilia nodded. "They're Fire Stones. Low quality pyroxene crystals that people burn for fuel rather than use wood."

Emilia took a stone from the bag and tossed it into the kiln. She flicked a tiny tongue of flame off her finger and threw it at the stone. The kiln burst into a bright, warm fire.

Subaru looked at the burning stone and then at Emilia in confusion.

"They used to burn these in the fireplaces at Roswaal's manor," Emilia explained. "They're more expensive than wood but easier to store and work with. And they don't make so much mess."

"Huh. You learn something new every day," Subaru mused. Subaru and Emilia sat side by side, staring into the dancing flames.

"Subaru, what... do you think we should do next?" Emilia asked, her hand slipping into his.

Subaru sighed. "I... I don't know, Mili. I mean... if we really are going to... give up on lifting your curse, at least for right now, then we should be focused on rescuing the spirits."

"Of course, we still don't know where they are either," Emilia muttered, pulling her knees to her chest and resting her cheek on them.

"Yeah," Subaru shook his head. "I'm glad that we were able to help Anri... always assuming that I didn't just leave her in

a worse situation than she was in before she met me..." Subaru said in a despairing voice.

"Subaru," Emilia wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. "When I met Anri, she was about to freeze to death or be eaten by mabeasts. She would have died that night if not for us. She would have been hunted down and killed by Elsa and Lye if not for us. She would have been killed by Malcolm an Griest if not for us. We *absolutely* helped her!" Emilia said firmly.

"And now I've put her in a bigger war than the one she started in," He sighed.

Emilia forced Subaru to look her in the eye. "Subaru," She said, her expression hard. "Do you really think everything would have been fine if you hadn't killed those Princes?"

Subaru frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I think that, if we had escaped, they would have simply shifted gears to blaming Anri for just associating with us! Even if we had offered them our lives, I think they would have still tried to go after Anri one way or the other!"

Subaru sighed. "Well, maybe," He admitted. "But we're still up shit's creek right now. I mean, I'm glad that we were able to help Anri, at least a little, but... it doesn't look like we got much out of it. We're in the exact same situation that we were in when we first got into the forest."

"That's not true, Subaru," Emilia said firmly. "We have a comfortable tent, good food, and a riding dragon. We know where we are and we can easily get to other places when we decide where to go."

Subaru didn't respond.

They both stared at the fire for a minute.

Emilia sighed. "Subaru, we... we can't stay in the forest, can we?"

Subaru shook his head. "No. We can stay in the village for a few days but then we'll have to leave. Radu knows that we're hiding in the forest because Anri mentioned it during our talk the other night. I have no expectation that Radu wouldn't sell us out in a heartbeat if he thought that it would make the other Houses back off. That means that it's only a matter of time before all of Gusteko knows where we are. I doubt the Houses will search for us personally but sooner or later Reinhard will hear about the forest. Reinhard could probably search the entire wood and find the village in an afternoon!" Subaru said bitterly.

"Then... where are we going?" Emilia whispered, slipping her hand into his.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Nowhere right now. We'll be safe in the village for a few days at the very least. That means that we can have a few days to reset and rest and try to figure things out. Patrasche needs to rest too. Then we'll decide... what our new plan is," He said helplessly.

They sat in silence, staring into the fire.

Subaru sat up watching the fire burn in the kiln. That little stone had been burning for hours with no sign of going out. An added bonus to using the kiln was that the fire was almost invisible to anyone outside the tent. Someone could be walking close by and they'd never see their campsite.

After they'd talked, Emilia had fallen asleep almost immediately. She'd laid down on a sleeping roll, stretched and passed out between words.

Subaru was tired as well but he couldn't bring himself to sleep yet. He had too much on his mind.

After a few hours, his legs went to sleep so Subaru quietly slipped out of the tent to stretch his legs.

He looked around the dark forest, his spirit somber and heavy.

Where the hell are we even going to go? After this mess, we won't be welcome in Gusteko anymore! And Lagunica sure as hell doesn't want us back. So... what?! We head for Kararagi after all?

I'm almost tempted to ask 'what's the point?' What the hell will we do after we inevitably manage to cause some kind of chaotic upheaval in Kararagi? We only have four nations to choose from and we're rapidly running out!

Beyond that, we still have absolutely no idea how to break Emilia's curse or where the spirits are being held.

Subaru looked around and his heart stopped.

He saw a light blazing not too far off in the distance.

Is that a camp fire? It can't be a forest fire. I doubt that anything would be burning naturally in this cold and wet forest.

Could the soldiers have come back? No way! Nobody is going to camp out in a mabeast infested forest at night after nearly being a mabeast chew toy!

All the same, I better find out who else is in the forest. If it's a casual traveler maybe it won't be too bad. But what if it's more smugglers? Or one of the Archbishops?

...Either way I need to know. We were planning to leave the forest in a day or two anyway but if Emilia and I aren't safe here then we need to get out fast.

I need to investigate.

Subaru knelt down beside Emilia sleeping body. "Mili! Wake up!" He whispered.

She didn't respond.

"Come on, Mili!" Subaru shook her. "We're not alone here! We need to do something!"

Emilia gave a soft murmur, then turned over and continued to sleep.

Subaru considered trying to keep waking Emilia then decided to let her sleep until he had a better idea what was going on.

Subaru fought his way through the deep snow, approaching the light.

Subaru found himself on the top of a small cliff. It looked like a hill that had been split apart during some earthquake long ago, and now there was a great cleft in the earth where a group could stay sheltered from the wind on three sides.

Subaru peered down the cliff. Below him, he saw a large fire burning, easily big enough to warm a crowd of people. Around the fire were several benches made of shaved logs. A single individual sat on one of them, wearing a hooded robe. They had their back to him as he looked down from above. They were poking at the fire with a long stick.

At the worst possible time, Subaru sneezed.

He struggled to do it silently and almost succeeded.

He looked back over the cliff side and peered down at the hooded stranger. There was no sign that they had heard.

"You must be cold up there," The figure said without moving. They sounded female and their voice was whisper soft. "Come and warm yourself by the fire. There is plenty of room."

Subaru's heart stopped.

What do I do? Do I run?

Subaru sighed. *'Run?' In this snow? I might as well see what they want. Maybe I can learn something. I doubt that they'll recognize me. If they do decide to start trouble, I'm really no worse off sitting down there than I would be if I tried to run and they started chasing me right now.*

Subaru laboriously walked down the slope of the shattered hill and took a seat on a bench not far from the hooded stranger. The figure had no skin visible. Their sleeves completely engulfed their hands and their face was hidden in their hood. Subaru couldn't make out any more details about them. Despite being close to the fire, shadows gathered unnaturally thickly around them.

The figure didn't say anything.

Subaru bit his lip wondering what he should say. "I didn't know that anyone else was in the forest," Subaru began.

That seems like a safe enough comment. I can pretend to be just an itinerant traveler and maybe I can find out if they're a lost traveler or if they came into the forest on purpose.

"Normally, you would be correct. The Great Forest of Eltor is cursed. It does not welcome travelers. However, an unusual number of people have come here as of late," The figure replied in a near whisper.

"Oh really? So what brought you in?" Subaru asked.

"Many things. First and foremost I was checking on something."

"Something?"

"Yes," The figure replied. "I needed to be sure that it was still intact. I'll be departing soon. How came *you* to be in the forest?"

"Total accident, honestly," Subaru said. "My friend and I got lost in a blizzard and we just wound up here."

Aside from neglecting to mention the part about being tossed into a portal by a loli Great Spirit, that's actually pretty close to being truthful. I mean, disregarding our little side trip with Anri.

"Hm," The figure replied. Subaru wasn't sure if she was agreeing or expressing doubt. "I will be departing soon but first I need to recover my strength. My recent battle has greatly sapped my endurance."

"Battle?" Subaru echoed. "Did you run into mabeasts?" He asked.

The figure paused a moment. "It's funny that you should ask. I've seen several witchbeasts within this forest but I think there might be something wrong with them."

"Wrong?" Subaru said carefully.

"They seemed... repressed. As if they were being controlled in some way."

Subaru bit his lip. "What makes you think that they were being controlled?"

"They chose not to attack me," She shrugged. "Normally, witchbeasts will always attack when they have the advantage of numbers but these seemed... restrained in some way."

"Maybe they think that you're stronger than you appear," Subaru ventured. *I have a similar feeling to be honest.* "Besides, I wasn't aware that it was even possible to tame mabeasts."

"It is a very rare skill. Some scant Divine Blessings do allow the wielder to control witchbeasts as does one of the Divine Authorities."

Wait 'Divine Authorities?' That's a new term. Usually people spit when they mention the Authorities. What does this person know about the Authorities?

Subaru chuckled dismissively. "Let me guess, Pride," Subaru grumbled.

The figure cocked their head. "No. It is Gluttony, actually. Why would you think that it was Pride?"

Subaru hesitated. "Well, pride is the first sin so I just assumed..."

The figure nodded. "I know that you've had a great deal of experience with pride, Subaru Natsuki."

Subaru jumped. "Excuse me?"

Subaru couldn't see anything of the figure's face but he sensed that they smiled. "Were you under the impression that I didn't know who you were?" The hooded figure asked in amusement.

Subaru scowled. "And *you* are?"

"Someone who desires to be your friend."

"Most of my closer friendships have begun with exchanging names," Subaru grated.

"I have had many names. The one I favor at the moment is Korë."

A very polite way of saying 'I don't feel like telling you who I am so here's a fake name.'

"Fine," Subaru grumbled. "Anything else you *do* feel like telling me?"

"Only that I have followed your career most carefully. I've been watching you closely, both you and Emilia."

Subaru stared at her. "What did you just say?" He gasped.

Korë cocked her head.

Subaru leapt to his feet and grabbed Korë by both shoulders. "Korë, what did you just say?!"

"Subaru Natsuki, you are being most forward," She chided. "Then again, it has been a very long time since my last carnal encounter so I suppose I could be amenable..."

"No! You know who Emilia is?!" Subaru demanded.

Korë sat there silently for a moment. "I know that she grew up in this forest and cursed it with a spell of endless winter. I know that she was attempting to become the King of Lagunica in order to obtain the sacred dragon blood so that she might restore her people from her own curse."

Subaru slowly let go of Korë and stepped back, sitting down on his log bench a short distance away.

I couldn't see anything inside of her hood. I was standing close enough to kiss her and there's plenty of firelight but Korë's face was just a black void. And there's something strange about her voice. She must be using magic to disguise who she is. Do I know her? I mean, what would be the point in disguising yourself to someone who doesn't know who you are anyway? Or is she worried that I might meet her later in a different capacity?

Still, maybe I can get something out of this...

Subaru cleared his throat. "Korë, something terrible has happened to Emilia."

"Oh?"

"She's been cursed. Everyone has forgotten who Emilia is. Her friends and family claim that she never existed and everything that she ever did is being attributed to someone else."

"How simply awful," Korë replied.

Why do I not believe that you mean that...

Subaru shook off his irritation. "You're the first person I've met that knows who she is! Do you have any idea why that would be?"

Korē sat there patiently until Subaru had finished speaking. "First of all, your woman has not been cursed. Her name has been stolen."

Subaru blinked. "What?"

"The Sin Archbishops of Gluttony, among certain others, have the power to devour the name of anyone they touch. If they do so, the world forgets that this person ever existed."

Subaru remembered Roy lunging at Emilia near the tomb.

Roy must have touched Emilia. I thought that he missed but I guess...

Perfect. So basically if Garfiel and I had been one second faster getting Roy away from Emilia, we wouldn't even have to deal with this mess. Just my luck.

Then why did Lye say that the Archbishops weren't involved? Was he lying to me?

Or was he just honestly confused by my calling it a curse?

"If that's true," Subaru said slowly, "Why do I remember her? Or why do you, for that matter?"

"Because we are what we are," Korē said calmly.

What the hell does that mean? ...Actually, I have the very unsettling feeling that I know what that means...

Let's just move on, I have more important questions to ask and that question would certainly derail this whole conversation. It might even lead to a fight...

"Lady Korē," Subaru continued, "Do you have any idea how we could... reverse this process?"

Korē cocked her head thoughtfully. "My first thought would be to hunt down and kill this Gluttony. Perhaps that would reverse it."

Subaru sighed. "I killed Roy just a few minutes after he 'ate' Emilia's name and that didn't happen."

"Did you? Most impressive. Also, most unfortunate that her name did not return."

"Yeah. Do you have any other ideas?"

Korē sat there for a long moment. "I might."

Subaru waited but Korē did not continue.

"Would you consider *sharing* them with me?" Subaru asked with an edge in his voice.

"Possibly," Korē mused. "Tell me, Subaru Natsuki, why do you think that *I* have not been affected by Gluttony's power?"

Oh boy. This conversation isn't going anywhere that I like. In fact, it's going directly someplace that I specifically wanted to avoid but I have no choice. Assuming that Korē knows what she's talking about, I've gotten more information about Emilia's condition in the past minute than I have in the past week.

Subaru sighed. "You're a member of the Witch Cult, aren't you? You're a Sin Archbishop."

"No. Try again."

Subaru blinked. He thought about the matter for a moment and then his eyes widened. "You're a witch?!"

Korē sounded annoyed. "A most unfortunate term for something which is in truth, a transcendent state of being but you are essentially correct."

"But... I thought that all of the witches were dead except for Envy. The stories claim that she devoured all of them."

"Such stories are in error but that is neither here nor there. Suffice to say that Envy had very little to do with most of the witches' passings. Beyond that: no, not all the witches are dead. Most still live and, even were that not the case, I can assure you that it is always possible to be deadier."

"Uh, what does that mean?"

Korē thought for a moment. "Witches wield the power of the Divine Authorities. Death means... something different to us. A witch can be long dead and yet still influence the world around her."

Subaru digested that. "Is there some reason that you won't even tell me your real name?"

Korē seemed to consider her answer. "I am aware that you have... some cause to be unhappy with me. Due to no deliberate malice on my part, I have caused you and your woman some... distress. I understand that you might resent me at the moment. I choose to withhold my identity until you have equal reason to feel gratitude toward me."

What the hell does that mean?

Subaru shook his head. "OK, well that is *really* interesting but could we get back to talking about how I could help Emilia?"

Korë sat there a moment. "Subaru Natsuki, why do you think that I came here?"

Subaru sighed. "Well you told me you came here to check on something. It may be self-centered of me but I think you probably came here to check on me."

"Among other things, yes."

"So you feel like telling me *why* you did that?" Subaru asked.

This is probably what everything has been leading up to. Korë wants something. We might as well get down to cases and see what she wants in exchange for telling me how to cure Emilia so that we can start haggling.

Korë thought for a long moment. "I... awoke when you and the others freed the Sanctuary."

"Huh?"

"I was in a form of... slumber, let's call it. I slept the years away since the Great Calamity and only regained my awareness periodically when something of import caught my attention. Such as when your woman entered the Sanctuary."

"If you were asleep then how did you know what was happening?"

"Witches can slip a bit of their spirit into other beings, using them as eyes and ears. In extreme cases it's said that it's even possible to put enough of your spirit into someone else's body that you can control them directly," Korë mused.

Well, that sounds in no way creepy!

"When the barrier broke," Korë continued, "I woke up and began to explore the world again. As did an ancient enemy of mine, also roused by the shattering of the Sanctuary's barrier. I came here to see who had accomplished this feat. I came to measure their capabilities."

Should I tell her that I didn't break the barrier? Because if that means she goes looking for Emilia, I think that might be bad.

"And? What do you think?" Subaru asked impatiently.

Korë lifted a hand, completely concealed by her sleeve, to where her mouth would be. "I'm not yet certain. You have more potential than anyone I've ever met but... I am unsure if you are the right candidate to assist me in my grand design. I can not afford to be wrong."

"And your grand design is what exactly?"

"At the moment, you do not need to know that. Suffice to say, I seek to protect the world from itself. To create a better world."

Subaru sighed, trying to master his irritation. "Can we please just focus on how I can help Emilia?"

"I am unwilling to commit to you just yet."

"Commit to me?! It's just answering a question! What kind of commitment is that?"

"More than you know. The Witches, the Archbishops, the Order of the Divine Exousia, and even the dragons are all tied together in an intricate web. No move can be made carelessly and each action sends countless threads vibrating. I have some allies and many enemies. If it were to be known that I had made alliance with you, some of my enemies might feel emboldened by a new target with which to sabotage me and some of my allies might cry betrayal and turn on me. I am currently engaged in a complex alliance with several others. Some might approve of our new alliance, some might be indifferent, and some might consider me a traitor or even attack me. I have dedicated my entire life to the fulfillment of my grand design. I can do nothing to risk it. Before I could form an alliance with you, I would require some assurance."

Subaru frowned. "Like what? You need me to promise that I'll protect you from your enemies and help you with this plan of yours?"

"Yes but your promise would not be sufficient."

Subaru held his breath. "You're talking about a magical contract, aren't you?"

"Yes. An unbreakable bond enforced by magic," Korë explained.

Oh shit! That sounds just like what Roswaal was thinking! I definitely want Emilia's name restored but I won't trade my soul away for it!

"I'm no one's slave!" Subaru said flatly.

Korë cocked her head. "You misunderstand me, Subaru Natsuki. I was speaking of a mutually beneficial partnership."

Subaru's eyes narrowed. "Alright... What terms were you thinking of?"

"In essence, we become each other's facilitator. I place myself and my considerable knowledge and talents at your disposal to use as you please. You dedicate yourself to helping me achieve my design."

Subaru frowned. "And what is this grand design? I'm not going to promise you that I'll do whatever I have to in order to fulfill your dream without *some* idea what that means."

"I wouldn't have expected you to," Korë replied. "However, you do not need to know that right now."

"I just said-"

"I am *not* offering you such a contract at this time. I merely said that I was considering it. Before I do so, I must be convinced that you are the man I've been searching for since before the paths were severed."

Subaru scowled. *I don't know what that means and right now I don't care.* "So you want to test me?" He said with an edge in his voice.

Korë nodded.

"Alright, what is this test?" He demanded pugnaciously. "I'm assuming that you'll only tell me how to heal Emilia if I pass."

"No. I shall tell you now," Korë replied.

"Huh?!"

"You will take my test in the process of saving your woman, Subaru Natsuki," She said quietly. "Your test is to restore her name."

Subaru's jaw dropped. "What? Why are you asking me to do that?"

"I think that it's entirely reasonable. Wouldn't you have done that anyway?"

Subaru shook his head in disbelief. "Well... Yeah," Subaru admitted.

"Then this is the perfect test."

Subaru squinted at her. "Korë, what's the point of this test? What are you even testing? How does this establish any kind of level of ability for me?"

"Oh. You are confused, Subaru Natsuki," Korë replied. "It is not your *abilities* that are in question, it is your determination."

Subaru shook his head. "I still don't get it."

"Emilia is the person that you love most in all the world, is she not?"

Subaru swallowed. *I don't know how she knows that but it makes me very uncomfortable that she does.* "Yes."

"You understand that your woman is in mortal danger so long as the world's memory of her is lost and all fear her to be the released Witch of Envy?"

Subaru sighed. "Yes."

"Your situation is dire and verging into crisis. This world goes into a wild panic when rumors that the Witch of Envy is free begin to circulate. If you do not restore your woman's name soon, it will be too late. Everyone will simply assume that their restored memories are fake and that the false ones are true."

Subaru frowned. "I also need to rescue the spirits."

"Your spirits are in no immediate danger, for the moment anyway. Danger may threaten them later but right now they are safe."

Subaru stared at her. "Assuming that I believe you."

"Yes. Assuming that you believe me," Korë said with equanimity. She paused. "Your family is in critical danger, Subaru Natsuki. What will you do?"

Subaru barely restrained himself from triggering *Indomitable* and punching his fist right through Korë's hood. "Whatever I have to do!"

Korë nodded again. "Then you will pass my test."

"What does that even mean?"

"The people you love are in great danger. If you do not save them you will lose them forever. If you will do whatever must be done to protect them, then I can trust in the strength of your determination. You will be able to assist me in my great work. If you find a line that you cannot cross in spite of the potential loss of those dearest to you, then you are not

the one that I have waited for."

Subaru sighed. "Would you just tell me how to restore Emilia's name already?!" He asked plaintively.

"I would but to my own nature I must be true. My knowledge of the Old Ways was gained from long study and is the single greatest asset that I possess. We are both seekers of miracles right now. The next time we cross paths, one of us may find the other in a time of need. If I were to share my knowledge with you, I dare say that you would owe me... a favor," Korë said quietly.

Subaru took a deep breath.

She's not wrong but I don't like the way she said that. Still...

"Yes," Subaru agreed, "If you told me how to fix everyone's memories of Emilia, I would definitely owe you a *favor*," He emphasized.

A favor is not the same thing as agreeing to do whatever you want. You're not tying me up in the same trap that Roswaal tried to!

Korë stared into the fire for a moment. "The Book of Wisdom," She replied.

"What's that?" Subaru asked.

"It was... the Witch of Greed's greatest treasure in life. It is a repository for all the knowledge in the world. It was fueled by her greed and also fed it," Korë explained. "The *world* may forget, Subaru Natsuki, but the Book does not."

Subaru frowned, "So... you're saying that if Emilia and I found that book, we could show it to people and prove that Emilia is who she claims she is?"

"No," Korë shook her head, "The Book of Wisdom taps directly into the world's memory for its knowledge. No normal mind could read it without being obliterated by the sheer amount of information flowing into their brain."

Subaru sighed, "So in other words, you're saying that the Book *could* prove that Emilia is Emilia if only we could use it. Unfortunately, reading it would make our friends' heads explode."

"It is not your friends that are the problem, Subaru Natsuki, but rather the world. It is *the world* that has forgotten your woman," Korë clarified. "However, the Book separates the remembered from the true. If you could bring the Book to the seat of the Od Laguna, the soul of this world, then the world would remember your woman and thus, so would everyone else."

Subaru thought about it, "Where can we find this Book? Does the Witch Cult have it?"

"No," Korë shook her head, "Before the Witch of Greed died, she lived on a floating island set adrift in the sky. That is where she left the Book."

"*An island in the sky?!*" Subaru repeated incredulously, "How the hell are we supposed to get up there?!"

"I'm afraid that some things you'll just have to figure out on your own," Korë replied.

Subaru gave her a dirty look. "OK, so assuming we do *get* the book, how do we find this Od Laguna thing?" Subaru asked.

"I can guide you to the seat of power," Korë said calmly.

Perfect. She's holding back details so that I'll still need her later.

Still, this would certainly be progress. Maybe we could find the location of the Od Laguna in the Grand Archives.

If we can ever go back there...

I still don't get why didn't she force me to make a deal with her before telling me anything...

Subaru thought about it, "Sounds like it could be manageable," He ventured, "Korë, do you know where this island is right now?"

"No," She answered. "The island drifts along the currents in the sky. It could be in any number of places after four hundred years."

Subaru sighed, "Well, that's not too helpful. Then again, it might not be that hard to find. I expect people would talk about a floating island."

"You should have no trouble locating it, Subaru Natsuki. Despite your casting away your copy of the Gospel."

Subaru jumped. "Wait. How did you know I did that?"

Korë ignored the question. "The Gospel is merely a lesser, imperfect copy of the Book of Wisdom. Discarding it was a most wise decision on your part, by the way."

Subaru felt a chill. "Why? *Is* the Gospel dangerous? Did I put Anri in danger by giving it back to her?" Subaru

demanded.

"The Princess was already in danger," Korë answered in a silky voice. "All those who wield power are in danger from birth until death. And the Gospel is naturally dangerous. All witchcraft is. But it *will* obey you and serve the girl for as long as you wish it. It will never betray its master or defy his orders. You need have no fear about that. I meant that you were wise to cast the Gospel aside because it serves as a beacon. No one of consequence would care about the Princess or that she possesses the Gospel. However, if you held the Gospel, it could allow others to find *you*..."

What does that mean? Fuck it. It probably doesn't matter right now as long as Anri isn't in danger. I need to focus on learning more about the Book.

Subaru sighed. "I need to get Emilia's name back as fast as I can. That's the only way I can protect her from the rest of the world."

"It will not be so simple, but restoring her name is a very necessary first step," Korë replied.

Subaru stared at Korë suspiciously. "What I don't get is: Why do you think I would want to work with you after I've already restored Emilia's name?"

Subaru thought that Korë might have been smiling. "In other words, why do I not simply keep the secret of restoring your woman's name as the price for you to do as I say?"

"Well, yeah. That's pretty much what I was thinking."

"Slaves make terrible allies, Subaru Natsuki," Korë commented. "I need someone who desires the success of my work with the same intensity as I do. The resolution of my design will benefit you greatly, perhaps even more than it will benefit myself. I have no doubts that I can persuade you to assist me."

Subaru frowned. "Well, I probably shouldn't say this but maybe you should doubt it. Once I have my family back together again, Emilia and I plan to--"

"Disappear?" Korë asked.

"That's the plan. We find someplace quiet, settle down as a family, and just let the world forget about us."

Kore's hand went to her hood. It was impossible to be sure but Korë seemed to be covering her mouth. Subaru could hear her chuckling.

"Something funny?" Subaru asked with an edge in his voice.

"Something familiar," Korë shrugged. "Most witches consider this approach at one time or another in their lives. It never works."

"Why not?"

"Because witches wield great power, Subaru Natsuki. That power makes us a lodestone for other people who desire to use that power in some way. Our power shapes the world as we walk it."

Subaru shrugged. "I'm not interested in power. I don't want to reshape the world, not even into something better. I tried it. It's too hard."

"Unfortunately, Subaru Natsuki, you have no choice. To wield an Authority is to claim one of the most powerful forces in the world. You *represent* power, Subaru Natsuki. You embody power to everyone around you and they are at your mercy, whether either of you likes it or not. The world around you cannot help but be shaped by your power, any more than a whale in the sea can avoid dragging smaller creatures along in its wake."

Subaru shook his head. "I'm just going to find a quiet forest somewhere and disappear. I'm not going to bother anyway."

"No? If you were to see, for example, a peasant girl being whipped by a nobleman because she refused to let him have his way with her, would you look the other way?"

Subaru scowled at her.

Korë continued matter-of-fact, "You either permit this to continue or you take action to change it. If you stop the noble then all of his fellows will recognize that you have the power to restrain them when you so choose. They will refuse to attempt similar crimes unless they are prepared to face you. If you decline to use your power to stop that noble, then you are affirming by your non-action that the noble is a lawful authority and within his rights to do such a thing. As more nobles get away with giving into their worst impulses without being punished, more and more will follow this path. By your actions and inactions, you will create the world around you."

"That's *really* philosophical, Korë," Subaru muttered.

"Moreover, consider the danger that your woman will be in," Korë continued.

Subaru shrugged. "That's why I want to restore her name."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, Subaru Natsuki, but while restoring her name will prevent people from hunting her because they *don't* know who she is, it will do nothing to protect her from the people who would hunt her down and slay her because they *do*."

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

"You and your woman have become champions to a nation. You have convinced the poor and downtrodden that you hear their voice and that you will take up their cause. Demi-humans and peasants across the continent look at you as a hero."

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Well, that's a serious mistake on their part," Subaru scoffed.

"Perhaps," Korë replied. "But have you considered the ramifications of this? You have dropped a large stone into a pond and the ripples travel."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"Your candidacy and the candidacy of your woman started out with absolutely no chance for success. Then you slew the Whale. And then you rescued two communities from the Witch Cult and killed a Sin Archbishop with your own hands. Your coronation has officially gone from impossible to inevitable. The power brokers in the capitol consider the matter to be virtually settled. This is making them very unhappy."

"They don't want me to be King?" Subaru asked in an indifferent tone.

"They do not. They are afraid that you will once again inspire the demi-humans to rise up and demand equality. They fear that the peasants might demand better conditions for themselves. They fear a new civil war. The status quo always works for the powerful because they *are* powerful in the status quo. The powerful shape the status quo to their liking. Change is threatening to the mighty because once one is at the top, there is only one direction to go and that is down. As soon as Emilia's name is restored and they remember that she has been chosen as your queen, they will plot to murder her."

Subaru gaped. "What?! Why?"

"Because the notion of a mixed family on the throne is more than they can stomach. It would do remarkable things to inspire demi-humans across the continent. If the kingdom's power brokers can not stop you from obtaining the throne, they will at least not permit your heir to be of mixed blood. They will remove your woman before she can cause trouble."

Subaru bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. "Fuck it! With the dragon blood gone, Emilia and I no longer have any incentive to pursue the throne anyway! Like I said, we'll just drop out of the selection and disappear."

"Oh," Korë said sadly. "I fear that would be most unwise."

"What are you talking about?"

"To men who worship power, the notion that anyone is not seduced by power is folly. No man walks away from power that he has won, save in a clever gambit to obtain more. The story of a man who refuses a throne in order to keep his demi-human lover safe; it is quite romantic, don't you think? It will inspire the demi-humans greatly."

"So what?" Subaru grumbled. "We'll just go into hiding. If the demi-humans want a war then they can fight it themselves."

"If you simply disappear, Subaru Natsuki, there will be many eager to speak in your name. You will need to decide whether to permit this or to try to control the dialog. If you ignore it, people will seek you out, seeking to silence you for another's words. If you become involved and attempt to control what is said in your name, you will only be drawn deeper into the quagmire of politics."

Subaru scowled at Korë. "Korë, why are you telling me all this?"

"You asked me why I was so certain that you would form an alliance with me. What I have described *will* be your life. However, I can help you. With my assistance, you and your family will have a perfectly safe and happy life. I will offer you all of my knowledge and talents to make it so."

"Very pretty words," Subaru grumbled.

Korë shook her head. "We *will* make it so. I will sign my heart into the contract. I will stake my life that you will have no complaints about your situation once I am permitted to guide you. I shall lead you to your ideal future without fail. Your power and my knowledge make anything possible and I will guide you in mastering your great power."

Subaru thought about it for a moment. "What happens when you sign a contract that requires you to do the impossible?" Subaru asked.

"You die," Korë answered. "The magic drives you to keep trying to fulfill your pledge until you simply die from exhaustion. This is the promise that I will make for you."

Subaru nodded slowly. "OK... Let's just say that I was interested... What would you want in exchange?"

"We have not reached that point yet."

"Come on! How about some good faith here? Give me a hint at least!"

Korë sat there, still as a statue. "Subaru Natsuki, have you ever heard the Legend of the Empyrean King? The King of Pride?"

Subaru frowned and searched his memory. He shook his head. "No. I don't think so."

"I'm not surprised. This story is only known to the most dedicated students of history. Or to those who have watched history unfold. However, that is your only hint for now. First you must pass my test and save your woman."

The cold wind began to pick up and fresh powdery snow blew everywhere. The intense cold burned at Subaru's lungs. Korë looked around. "I believe that is where our palaver ends this night. My endurance has reached its limit and I must rest. I will find you when you have completed your test."

Subaru heard the sound of something running across the snow. He turned and saw Patrasche racing down to the fire. She stopped at Subaru's side, looming over him protectively.

"Hey, girl," Subaru said, rubbing her face.

"Also, would you be so kind as to give your woman a message for me?"

Subaru stiffened. "What's that?" He asked suspiciously.

"Tell her that her third vision is not a nightmare. It is a prophecy."

"What the hell does that mean?" Subaru demanded.

Korë ignored him. "One more thing," Korë continued. "Just a few days ago, the Shade of a great enemy of mine came into this forest. She is a witch of terrible power and we were both seeking the same... prize. We did battle and your dragon was wounded in the process," Korë said. "The fight was inconclusive and we were separated. I was unable to find her after this. I am uncertain if she has left the forest or if she still lurks here seeking to cause further mischief."

"Another witch?!" Subaru asked incredulously.

Korë stared at him for a moment. "As I said, not all the witches are what you would consider to be dead. Moreover, because of your actions in the Sanctuary, the seals are beginning to weaken."

"What seals? What are you talking about?"

"The dragon Volcanica, for reasons best known to himself, decided to tie every seal in this world together, whether he made that seal or not. That makes each seal much stronger than any would have been individually. However it also means that a single fractured seal, such as the Sanctuary, compromises all of them. My foe has been imprisoned since the time of the Great Calamity. Now, all the prisons are weakening and her restless Shade is free to roam the world as she pleases. At least her Shade only possesses a small fraction of her terrible power."

Subaru noticed that the dragon refused to take her eyes off of Korë. The riding dragon seemed nervous or even afraid of the shrouded figure. Subaru was so fixated on this that it took him a moment to process Korë's words.

"Wait a minute!" Subaru blinked. "Are you saying-"

"You have had a greater impact on this world than you know, Subaru Natsuki. The seals are weakening and powers that have lain dormant for centuries are beginning to stir. I warn you. My foe also seeks to draw you out. If you should cross paths with her: Flee her! Shun her! Speak no words to her! She is deadly and she will seek to entrap you in her web for her own purposes. With any luck, she has lost your trail but I assure you, she will find it again."

Korë stood up without another word and walked away.

Subaru looked up at his riding dragon. *Wait. Patrasche was wounded during Korë's fight with the witch? How did she get in the middle of that fight in the first place?*

Garfiel's words during their flight from the Sanctuary suddenly came back to him: *"I thought that I saw an extra Ryuzu... I think that she was riding your earth dragon out of there."*

"Wait a second!" Subaru gasped after the departing figure, "Who the hell are you?!"

Korë didn't pause nor turn around and quickly disappeared into the storm.

Subaru and Patrasche returned to the tent. The storm ended abruptly as soon as Subaru and the dragon got back. Subaru had a few suspicions about that convenient timing.

Patrasche yawned and quickly returned to sleep in the snow, the cold not bothering her at all.

Subaru sneaked into the tent trying his best not to wake Emilia but sleep did not come easily to him that night.

Emilia woke early the next morning.

"Good morning," Emilia said stretching. "How did you sleep?"

Subaru made a face. "Not well, honestly. Something happened last night."

Emilia frowned. "What was it?"

Subaru sighed. "Patrasche and I... met a witch," He said helplessly.

"What?!" Emilia gasped.

Subaru sighed. "After you went to sleep last night, I saw a campfire in the distance and went to investigate," He explained.

Emilia stared at him. Then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Subaru," She grated. "Are you telling me, that after *everything* we just went through, all of the arguments we had, you *still* decided to go off into danger without me or even waking me up to tell me about it?!"

"Hey!" Subaru put up his hands defensively. "That was *not* my fault! I *tried* to wake you up!"

"Really?" Emilia asked skeptically, folding her arms across her chest.

"Yes! I called your name, I shook you, I did everything I could think of to wake you up! You were *out*!" Subaru emphasized.

Emilia started. "...Just like Anri's guards when she met the witch," Emilia whispered.

Subaru's eyes widened. "Wow," He whispered. "I can't believe that I didn't put that together..." Subaru scowled. "The witch put a *spell* on you just so that we could have a nice private chat!" He hissed.

Emilia shook her head. "Later, Subaru. Just finish the story!"

Subaru sighed. "Alright, so I found a bonfire pit with a woman sitting there. Hey, just out of curiosity, did your people build anything this far away from the village?"

Emilia shook her head. "No, we didn't wander very much."

"Yeah, that's what I figured," Subaru muttered. "She probably made it with magic. Anyway, the woman introduced herself as Korë. She told me that she was a witch and that she was... um, interested in working with me."

"On what?"

He shook his head. "She wouldn't say. She said that she wanted to test me first and then she just... walked away."

Emilia frowned. "What did she look like?"

Subaru shrugged. "Dunno. She was using magic to disguise herself. I couldn't see any part of her face and even her voice and body shape seemed oddly... distorted if that makes any sense. All I could see was that she wore a hooded robe," He replied.

"What else did Korë say to you?"

"Well, she had a message for you, strangely enough."

"For me?"

"I didn't understand it. She told me to tell you that the 'third vision is not a nightmare. It is a prophecy.' I have no idea what that means. Does that mean... anything to you, Mili?" He said, frowning in sudden concern. Emilia was staring off into the distance, her expression a caricature of absolute shock.

"Mili? What's wrong?!" Subaru urged.

Emilia started. "Oh! Nothing. I was just... thinking about something..."

Subaru frowned. *I don't buy that for an instant.* "So... does Korë's message mean anything to you?"

"Well," Emilia hedged. "I'm guessing it's about my third trial from the Sanctuary."

"A prophecy?" Subaru asked in concern. "What was the third vision about?"

"I'm not sure."

"What?"

"I'm really not sure. I... It was like a dream. Just... concepts and images but with no real context. I... couldn't put it into words," She replied.

Subaru stared at Emilia. *I don't know... I don't think Emilia is lying to me exactly but... I think she could probably tell me more if she wanted to.*

Why is she trying to hide this from me? What is she trying to hide?

"Subaru, did Korë say anything else?"

Subaru looked at Emilia for a long time, waiting to see if she would say anything else. Finally, he gave up. "She told me that an old enemy of hers was in the forest and that they had a fight. She says that's how Patrasche got her injury," He said, pointing at the sleeping dragon.

"*Another* witch in the forest?! Do you believe her?"

Subaru rocked his hand back and forth then shrugged. "I mean... I'm not sure what the point of lying about that would be. And it would explain how the grove with that weird door in it got destroyed. I'm guessing that a dispute between witches does a lot more collateral damage than just breaking a few windows."

Emilia frowned and thought about it. "So Korë and her foe could both still be in the forest?" Emilia said in a worried tone.

Subaru nodded. "Yeah. I'm afraid so. Korë said she didn't know if her enemy had left the forest or not and I have no idea if Korë is still hanging around here." He paused. "So basically, we're all alone in the woods... except maybe we're *not* alone and we could be being watched by any number of people whose motives we don't understand. That's a happy thought."

Emilia thought for a moment. "Subaru, do you think Korë was the one who gave Anri the Gospel?!" Emilia asked.

Subaru thought for a moment, then sighed. "I have no idea. And I'm a fucking idiot because I didn't even think to *ask* that question! But I'm pretty sure that what happened the night that the grove was destroyed has everything to do with the Gospel... somehow."

"What do you mean?"

"The note that got changed was written on a page from the Gospel. I *know* that that's important to understanding what's really going on!"

"Um. How?"

Subaru chuckled. "I have absolutely no idea!"

Emilia shook her head. "Some detective you are," She grumbled but her lips curved in a fond smile.

He shrugged. "Hey, I'm doing my best. Oh, also some good news: Korë says that you're not cursed. She claims that the reason that nobody can remember you is because Roy ate your name."

"What?!"

Subaru shrugged. "Apparently, if you believe Korë, the Archbishops of Gluttony have the power to devour a person's name by touching them and that makes everyone forget who they are."

Emilia frowned, processing the strange concept. Then she shook her head. "Did she give you any ideas on how to reverse it?"

Subaru sighed. "Korë said that there's an ancient relic called the Book of Wisdom. She claims that if we were to find it and bring it to the soul of this world, the spell would be broken."

Emilia's face grew pensive. "OK... Did she tell you where the book was?"

Subaru nodded. "She claims it's located on an island in the sky."

Emilia stared at him. "How could we possibly get up there? Wyverns are very rare and we can't go back to Siros right now. I doubt that anyone else would lend us one."

"Especially since our names are mud in two kingdoms right now," Subaru agreed. He paused. "I actually have an idea for a machine that might be able to lift us up there but I'm not sure if we could build it without the spirits' help."

"Subaru, please tell me that this machine is not called a 'catapult,' Emilia said in a worried tone.

Subaru burst out laughing. "Don't worry, Mili. I'm not *that* crazy."

Emilia looked at Subaru in annoyance and then started to sheepishly laugh along.

The laughter felt freeing after all the stress they'd been through lately.

Emilia finally quieted. "Did Korë tell you where this island was?"

Subaru shook his head. "She said that she didn't know."

Emilia sighed. "It's too bad we didn't know to ask about it while we were in the Grand Archives."

"Yeah. But I think I know where we can start looking," Subaru added. "I remember a passage from the Gospel that we didn't understand before: *'The Quest for the Book begins with the Silk Merchant of Picoutatte.'*"

Emilia frowned. "Picoutatte? Why there?"

"I have no idea," Subaru admitted.

Emilia thought about it. "Korë said that the Book was on a flying island, right?"

Subaru nodded. "Have you ever heard of one?"

Emilia shook her head. "Only in fairy tales. But I doubt that it's in Picoutatte. If a flying island was anywhere inside the

kingdom, wouldn't we have heard about it? And what does a silk merchant have to do with anything?"

Subaru thought about it. "I'm not sure if the island is *there*. The Gospel just said that our quest starts there. Picoutatte might be a good place to gather information. Maybe silk is a reference to the triangle trade."

"The what?"

"It's something that I read about in Roswaal's library. Apparently, the silk trade takes merchants to three different nations so it's very important for international commerce. Silk worms only live in Kararagi, efforts to introduce them anywhere else have failed. So merchants go to Kararagi to buy silk. Then they bring it to Lagunica which has a huge textile industry to spin it into cloth and make clothes. Then the clothing is sold in Gusteko or Vollachia. Silk is a great insulator so it's awesome where the weather is really hot or really cold. Then the merchant goes back to Kararagi to buy more silk with his profits and the cycle starts all over again. It's actually not a bad idea to talk to a silk merchant. They travel all over the world so they might have seen a flying island."

"But, Subaru, there must be dozens of silk merchants in Picoutatte. Maybe hundreds! How will we find the one the Gospel is talking about?"

Subaru shrugged. "Beats me but at least we have an idea of what to do now. We can head to Picoutatte and start asking questions. That's more of a plan than we had before. Even if the Gospel is just blowing smoke, we'd at least be somewhere that nobody expects us to be and we could gather some information."

Subaru paused. "Korë also told us that the spirits are OK for right now. She suggested that we start by looking for the Book and... I hate to admit it but I think she might have a point. If we rescue the spirits right now, we're just putting them in more danger. The whole world will be after them again as soon as they're with us."

He hesitated. "And besides, until they remember who you are or at least learn to accept you... being with the spirits just puts *you* in danger," Subaru sighed in a guilty voice.

Emilia bit her lip and nodded. "But if we can fix everyone's memories then there's no issue. We can just walk into the capitol and take them back."

"Yeah," Subaru sighed. "It's the best plan I can come up with but I don't feel very good about it. I feel like I'm abandoning them..."

"Subaru," Emilia said firmly. "Nobody thinks that you would ever abandon your family. Beatrice and Puck know that most of all. They're not worried that you've forgotten about them. They'll know that the only reason you haven't come for them yet is because you're hard at work trying to fix this mess! They have faith in you, Subaru. They know that you'll rescue them."

Subaru nodded sadly. "I sure hope so... But we need to decide what to do. We either go try to save the spirits or we go looking for this Book..."

Emilia glanced away and bit her lip. A dozen emotions flickered over her face. She looked back at Subaru, her face conflicted. "What do you think?"

Subaru sighed. "I think if we have any avenues to pursue to making everyone remember you, we need to take it. Restoring your memory would solve almost all of our problems right now."

Emilia took a deep breath. "Then let's find the Book and get our family back," She said with determination.

Subaru and Emilia returned to the village that afternoon. There was really nothing to do but lay around and try to rest up. They had thrown nearly all the vegetables that they had left into their lunchtime stew. They knew they couldn't take any of the vegetables with them on their journey, they would spoil in no time.

Emilia was tending to the fire while Subaru sat on the bed, doodling in a notebook.

"Subaru, what are you doing?" Emilia said, coming over and sitting beside him to look.

Subaru learned over to let her see. "Just a design I was thinking of."

Emilia frowned and then her eyes widened. "Subaru, is that the village?!"

"Yup."

"I had no idea that you could draw so well!"

Subaru looked awkward. "Well... I cheated..."

"What does that mean?"

Subaru hesitated and then shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Anyway, I was thinking when we come back to the village, I'd have this little project to keep me busy."

Emilia frowned at the picture. "What are those vines running through the trees and around the houses."

"They're not vines they're wires. And they're all strung with tiny little lights, like the ones we saw in Ganaks."

Emilia stared at him. "Subaru. Do you have any idea how expensive those lights are?!"

"I think I know a way to make cheap ones," Subaru shrugged. "It'll give me and the spirits something to do once we break the curse on the village." He smiled at her. "Wouldn't the village look great all lit up like this? I had a friend whose family used to decorate their homes and trees with lights every winter. I always thought it looked nice."

Emilia smiled and shook her head. "Subaru, I can't believe how you always act like breaking the curse was as easy as crossing a road."

Subaru shrugged. "Hey. Confidence is important, right?"

Emilia just laughed fondly.

They sat there for a moment.

"How many days do you think it will take us to get to Picoutatte?" She asked.

Subaru sighed. "Honestly, we're crossing the entire kingdom diagonally. I think that it will take us close to a week, even on Patrasche."

Emilia thought about it. "But still, nobody knows where to look for us on that journey. This should be much less stressful than our flight from the Sanctuary."

"Yeah, that's true," Subaru agreed. "Then again, it would be hard for a journey to be *more* stressful than that one."

Emilia glared at him. "Subaru. Please. Don't tempt fate."

Subaru snickered. "Yeah. Good point."

They were both quiet for a moment. Emilia looked moody.

"What's wrong? Are you worried that Picoutatte will be a dead end?" Subaru asked.

Emilia shook her head. "No. Even if it is, we'll keep looking. We know what to look for now and we'll find it."

Subaru nodded. "That's my Mili," He said fondly.

Malcolm an Griest sat in his cell that night, fuming. His cell was isolated, a single cage in a small room, surrounded by a dozen guards. His spirit companions had been returned to him but this cell was specifically designed to hold people with unusual powers and he had no chance of breaking out.

"Malcolm an Griest," A guard said in a bored voice. "You have a visitor."

Malcolm started. *Who would visit me here? Don't they usually send prisoners to the interrogator rather than the other way around?*

To his shock, Deann walked into the room, her face as hard as stone.

"Daughter?!" Malcolm gasped, what are you doing here.

Deann looked at the guards. "Leave us," She ordered.

"Hey!" One of the guards protested. "Wait just a second, Lady! We're not going to-"

Deann handed him a piece of parchment which the guard read incredulously. He handed it back to her with an expression of disbelief on his face. "Alright, boys," He said in a sullen voice. "We're waiting outside. They need to have a private conversation."

Deann sat down on a chair in front of Malcolm's cell as the soldiers quickly filed outside the room and shut the door.

"Daughter, what is going on here?!"

Deann's face was grim. "I have simply wonderful news," She said in a mocking voice. "House Ithil and House Griest have formed a solid alliance."

"What?!" Malcolm demanded. "Why on earth would you *do* that?!"

"Because Subaru Natsuki ordered me to," She said in the same flat voice.

"What are you talking about?!"

"I met with Subaru Natsuki at the summit. He..."

"Hey!" Subaru said in a friendly tone. "Duncan and Deann, right? How you been?"

Deann's face twisted in hatred. "Get out of my way or I *will* slice you to ribbons."

Subaru chuckled. "You might find that a little harder than you think."

Deann tried to step around him but Subaru sidestepped and didn't let her.

"Get out of my way!" She growled between clenched teeth.

"We need to talk," Subaru said quietly.

"We have nothing to talk about!" Deann said.

She tried to push past him but Subaru grabbed her arm.

Before Deann could reach for her swords, Subaru whispered in a hard voice, "I have some *very* important information to relay to you. Either we go someplace where I can tell you about this privately, or I'll share it with the entire fucking room," He said with a friendly smile on his face.

Deann hesitated. She had no idea what Subaru was talking about but something in his voice convinced her to listen. She jerked her head and led Subaru and Duncan into an empty room nearby.

Subaru closed the door behind them.

"Very well," Deann said impatiently. "What is it?!"

Subaru had a friendly smile on his face. "I need you two to help protect Anri and her House and I'm absolutely certain that you'll want to do it," Subaru said gaily.

Deann and Duncan stared at each other incredulously. "What are you even talking about?!" Deann demanded.

"What do you think of this?" Subaru asked, pulling a small piece of parchment out of his satchel and holding it up for them to read.

Duncan and Deann read it. Then they gasped in unison and Deann made a wild grab for the paper.

"Oh no, no, no," Subaru said in the same cheerful tones, pulling the paper back.

"Where did you get that?!" Deann gasped.

"That's not really important," Subaru replied, putting it back in his satchel. "The question that you should be asking is, what will I *do* with it?"

Deann just stared at him in horror.

"So what are the other princes planning?" Subaru asked intently.

Deann hesitated for less than a second. "The last I heard, the princes were planning to murder you and your elf."

"Why?"

"Are you *serious*? How can you even ask that?!" Deann asked in shock.

Subaru's face darkened.

"I mean," Deann stumbled over her words. "They blame you for the destruction of their troops. Apparently Lagunica is also threatening war just to kill you and your elf! The princes hope that by killing you they can convince Lagunica to back down."

"What about Anri?" Subaru muttered.

Deann shook her head. "They plan to threaten war unless she hands you over to them."

"Aren't they worried about fighting us?" Subaru asked incredulously.

Deann shook her head. "They claim they have special forces standing by that can handle a witch."

"What forces?" He grated.

"I don't know. I swear that I don't. The princes aren't really talking to me at the moment. They blame my father for starting this whole mess."

Subaru thought for a moment. "Then I'm going to need you to help me protect Anri," Subaru said, once again in his friendly tone.

Deann stared at him incredulously. "*What?!*" Deann asked in disbelief.

"Hey, Duncan," Subaru mused. "I'm not really all that well versed with Gusteko custom and law. What do *you* think would happen if the Hierocracy in Pardochel was given a signed confession that Malcolm an Griest conspired with assassins and even a Sin Archbishop in an effort to kill his rivals' for the throne?"

Duncan stared at Subaru. "Prince Malcolm couldn't possibly have known that she was a Sin Archbishop!" Duncan protested weakly.

Subaru smiled indulgently. "I stand corrected. So he only consorted with assassins to kill innocent people, most of

whom were children by the way," Subaru said mockingly. "Anyway, what do you think the Hierocracy would do?"

Duncan's voice was numb with shock. "There's no question of what the Holy King and Hierocracy would do. They would-

"Lord Subaru," Deann broke in desperately. "Do you understand what would happen if the Hierocracy ever saw that paper?! Our House would be stripped from the rolls of Gusteko! This wouldn't just punish my father or his family, this would doom tens of thousands of people who look to my House for protection! They would no longer *be* people in the eyes of the law! They would be stripped of *all* legal rights, they could be hunted like animals or killed for sport. The other Houses would wage war against us to pick the meat off our bones. This disgrace would be all encompassing and would last for centuries. You would be dooming entire generations to live and die in hopeless misery!" Deann took a ragged breath. "Now do you understand why you must not show anyone that paper?"

"Do *you* now understand what I'm going to do if anything happens to Anri?" Subaru asked intently.

Deann panted for breath, her eyes huge. "All those lives... Innocent people for countless generations whose lives would be ruined before they're even born... You won't do it. Even you can't be that heartless!"

"Deann," Subaru said calmly. "Do you remember about two days ago when I burned thousands of innocent people alive simply for being in my way?"

Deann gathered her hands to her mouth and stared at Subaru in horror for a long moment. Finally she nodded. "I understand," She whispered. "We will take good care of Princess Kairei. She will be as my own little sister from now on. I will stake my life upon it."

"Yes," Subaru said firmly. "You *have*."

Malcolm stared at Deann, looking as if the world was spinning around him.

Deann shook her head. "And that was that," Deann said in a flat voice. "The Fire Witch had me and he knew it. If he'd asked me for my life or my body, I'd have had no choice but to acquiesce."

"How did this happen?!" Malcolm demanded. "How could Subaru Natsuki have gotten that contract?!"

"It hardly matters now, does it?" Deann spat. "The only thing that matters, Father, is that you have sold myself, Canmore, and everyone else in House Griest into perpetual slavery under Subaru Natsuki."

"What's happening in Sanshi?" Malcolm asked.

Deann sighed. "Uncle Robert has taken control of the city in your absence. He's looking after Canmore. I've already sent Duncan back to explain the situation to him in private. Uncle Robert will understand the predicament we're in and endorse the alliance. I'm also asking Duncan to bring Canmore back here. He and Kairei were friendly once. Perhaps they could me more than that. I'm hoping that I can tempt her into a permanent alliance with our family."

Malcolm stared at her. "Are you mad?! Are you *trying* to merge our Houses?"

"Yes," Deann said flatly. "If House Ithil unites with House Griest, then it would be *also* answerable for all of our crimes. Subaru Natsuki might be more reluctant to destroy our House if he knows that he would pull down Princess Kairei's House at the same time.

"We don't need to do anything desperate yet! We'll figure this out!" Malcolm said firmly. "There's a way out of this mess.

Deann gave him a long, cold stare. "When I saw that parchment, I just couldn't believe it. You ordered these people to be murdered," Deann whispered in disbelief. "These were not rivals or warriors, they were children. You paid assassins and Witch Cultists to murder children..."

Malcolm scowled. "I was trying to put Canmore-"

"Into that stupid chair in Pardoche!?" Deann demanded in a withering voice. "How could that possibly be worth all this?!"

Malcolm took a deep breath. "Daughter, that throne is our birthright! I will see us returned to it. I did what I had to do!"

Deann stared at him for a long moment and then shook her head. "I've always admired your certainty, Malcolm."

Malcolm's eyes widened at this mode of address.

"I've never had your certainty," Deann admitted. "My conscience won't let me say that I *have* to turn my back on you. But I'm going to do it anyway."

Deann stood up and walked away.

"Daughter!" Malcolm shouted. "Wait!"

Deann paused but she didn't turn around.

Malcolm reached into a pocket. "Here, take this," He murmured, holding something out to her.

Deann sighed and walked back to the cage, her eyes hard and cold. "What is this?" She asked, taking the small black book.

"A gift to our House. It is the Gospel of a Witch," He said intently.

Deann jumped and nearly dropped the book. "What?!" She gasped.

"It was given to me by the Mother of the Assassin's Guild when we signed the contract. She wished to develop closer ties with the future Kings of Gusteko," Malcolm whispered.

Deann scowled at him. "Did you even *question* if she had an ulterior motive?!"

"Of course she did," Malcolm said bluntly. "Everyone does. People try to use you and you try to use them in turn. That is life for the powerful. All the same, her offering permitted me to push Siros straight to the brink of annihilation with small loss."

"And then the book was done with you and it led you to ruin!" Deann said scathingly.

Malcolm shook his head. "No. The Gospel guided me true," he admitted. "I misunderstood its warning. In the Valley of the Winds, it told me that the army seeking to protect the princess would be destroyed at dawn. I thought that it was warning me of an impending battle between our forces and the forces of Lagunica and Siros but instead, it was a warning that the Fire Witch would singlehandedly destroy our entire army..."

Deann shook her head in disgust. "I want *nothing* to do with this accursed thing!" She said. "Your schemes and ambition have already ruined all our lives!"

"You are my heir, Deann," He said simply.

"A wretched legacy I would be happy to deny!" She hissed.

Malcolm flinched. He took a deep breath and continued. "You need to think about your brother," Malcolm said calmly.

Deann hesitated.

"He needs your guidance. He needs everything that you can offer him. That book will help you. It can't walk the path for you but it will guide you along the way."

"Until the witch decides to betray me," Deann said flatly.

"Yes," Malcolm nodded. "Few of your allies will not threaten betrayal when they can get away with it. That Book is no different. But you need every advantage you can get right now. Perhaps the Book can even guide you out of Subaru Natsuki's trap."

Deann hesitated for a long moment. Finally, she tucked the book into her pocket and left the cell without another word.

The soldiers slowly shuffled back in and Malcolm sank back down on his cot, burying his face in his hands.

Subaru and Emilia were in bed. Subaru had wrapped himself around Emilia with his face buried in her silver hair but sleep was not coming easily to them tonight.

"Subaru," Emilia murmured. "Are you awake?"

"I'm awake," Subaru murmured. "Are you?"

"Yes, I'm- Subaru!" She protested, realizing what he'd just asked her.

Subaru laughed.

Emilia shook her head gently. "Subaru. You are always such a child."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Hm. I wouldn't go quite *that* far," Emilia replied and Subaru heard the smile in her voice.

Emilia appeared to be looking at her own hand. Subaru reached around her and entwined their fingers together as they snuggled closer.

"What are you thinking about?" Subaru murmured.

Emilia sighed. "A lot of things. You know... I always dreamed that we'd come back here together. Ever since I realized that I loved you, I thought... that maybe when everything was finished and the forest was saved, this would be our place. Our home. Now we're getting ready to leave it and... there's fair odds that we may never come back."

Subaru took a deep breath. "I think that we'll be back, Mili, but this place isn't home."

"Hm?"

"Anyplace that our family can be together and safe and flourish. That's home. Anywhere would be home as long as we're all together."

"I know that, Subaru," She whispered. "But I'm still sad about leaving this place behind."

"I know."

They were silent for a moment.

"Emilia, when did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That you loved me. When... did you realize that?" Subaru asked.

Emilia was quiet. "I think... I think it was that night we first talked about what happened at the forest. Or maybe... maybe I already knew that I loved you and that's *why* we talked about it."

"What do you mean?"

Emilia took a deep breath. "I was terrified, Subaru. I was so sure that you'd hate me after I told you what I did to the forest and my own family. That you wouldn't want me anymore. I... think maybe I told you the truth that night because I realized that the longer this went on... the more it would hurt when you finally left me. So I decided to get it over with."

Subaru hugged her tight. "But I did want you after I knew. I wanted to be with you *more* after I knew."

"I know," Emilia whispered and Subaru could tell she was smiling. "I remember that I couldn't stop crying. I feel like I cried for hours but... that was one of the happiest moments of my life. You really weren't going to leave me."

"Never."

They were quiet for a bit.

"Subaru, when did you know?"

"Me? I guess it was... the evening that we had the picnic. The night we had our first fight."

"I remember," She whispered.

"I thought... I thought you'd only be able to love... 'Subaru the Invincible,' not some loser who had no idea what he was doing. My greatest fear was that some day... you'd see me the same way that I see myself and then you'd realize I wasn't worth your time. I knew that you'd leave me then..."

"I guess I was a little mean to you that night," Emilia admitted. "I forced you to talk about your old life. I didn't realize how much those memories hurt."

Subaru shook his head. "I'm grateful. You made me face my fears. I never would have been brave enough to do it if you hadn't been standing there with me. You knew... what I was but you didn't leave. You got angry with me but you still stayed with me."

"Hm. It's funny. I never realized that our fears were so similar," Emilia mused.

"I can never wrap my mind around it," Subaru admitted. "How could you be worried that I'd ever leave you? You're the most wonderful person in two worlds."

"That's the way that I feel about you. And I think that it's ludicrous that you feel that way about me," Emilia murmured.

"Yup, same here," Subaru chuckled.

They were quiet.

"Subaru. I do love you, you know," Emilia whispered.

He kissed the back of her neck. "Those are always my favorite words to hear, Mili. But I bet I love you more."

"Not possible," Emilia murmured, rolling over in bed. Their lips met.

Capella sat in her cell growling to herself and fantasizing about all the horrible torments that she would inflict on her enemies the second that she got out of here.

To make matters even more humiliating for the Sin Archbishop, after one of her interrogators had made the drastic mistake of underestimating how dangerous the slender girl could really be, a hard, metal restraint had been locked over Capella's face that stopped her from closing her mouth all the way. This was intended to prevent her from biting herself or anyone else.

"Oh. This is just too funny!" A voice tittered.

Capella's head snapped up to stare at the lanky, dirty, and painfully-thin young man standing outside her cell. He grinned at her with a mouth full of sharp teeth.

"You fuckwit," Capella grumbled. "It took you fucking long enough! What in the hell were you doing? Jacking off to a pastry?"

"Parodchel had a famous visiting chief tonight at a prominent supper club," Lye replied. "I wasn't about to miss that. They were serving *Gigot ou Epaule de Pre-Sale, Farci!*" Lye said in an excited voice.

"Eat shit and die, faggot," Capella spat. "Now hurry the fuck up and get me out of here!"

Lye giggled as he grabbed her cell door and effortlessly ripped it off its hinges.

Capella scowled as she walked out of her cell. "First thing I'm going to do is find that guy who tried to extort me and peel off every inch of his skin! Then I'm going to grab that slutty princess and I'm going to shove my hand up her ass until I can wear her body like a bracelet! Then I'm-"

Lye grabbed Capella's metal mouth-guard and tore it apart.

Capella spat the metal parts out of her mouth with disgust. "What are you doing, jerk-off?! You trying to rip my head apart?!"

Lye chuckled.

Capella snarled. "I'm going to crush your fucking balls as soon as I get out of here. Now get this stupid bracelet off of me!" Capella demanded.

"Nope!" Lye said with a broad smile.

Capella's eyes glittered. "Lye. Are you *really* not going to take this bracelet off my arm?" She asked in a dangerously quiet voice.

"Nope," Lye repeated with a titter. He leaned in to whisper in her ear. "*She's* going to take it off," He said.

Capella's face went slack, her eyes became huge and her expression twisted in horror.

Lye looked at Capella's despairing face and burst out laughing. "Oh Gods! If you could only see your face! Yup! She's back! She sent me here to get you. She wants to have a nice, long talk with you about how you managed to fuck things up *this* badly! You knew that what's in the Vault wasn't for you and on top of it, you managed to antagonize Subaru Natsuki when he was desperate enough to consider joining us!"

Capella swallowed hard. "Lye, buddy, err... come on! Let's... let's just go and find Subaru Natsuki! We can grab him together and take him back with us, all tied up in a bow!"

Lye burst out laughing. "Oh yeah, right! Like I'm going to risk pissing *her* off just to yank your fat out of the fire!"

"Come on!" She said desperately. "Help a sister in the Order out!"

Lye's face grew sly. "Sure. So, Capella, where does your Gospel tell us to look for him?"

Capella hesitated.

"By the Gods!" Lye gasped, his face fixed in an expression of exalted joy. "You really did it! You gave your Gospel away!"

"It's a temporary thing!" Capella protested. "I can take it back any time that I want! I just gave it to him so that he could push Siros right up to the wall and force that tit-less wonder to open the Vault!"

"Heh. She was wondering why you weren't properly attending to her when she called for you. Guess that explains that," Lye mused.

Capella's face went ashen.

Lye smirked. "You know, I had a nice long talk with Subaru, Capella. We're actually on pretty good terms. He was starting to consider working with us. Nice job blowing that!"

Capella gaped. "That's bullshit! This is all in your flaccid imagination, you greasy fuck! He never would have worked with us, you shit weasel!"

"Hm. *She* thinks that he might have," Lye said serenely.

Capella clapped her hands over her mouth, her expression horrified.

"Anyway," Lye said cheerfully, "She sent me out here to bring you back to her, quietly or kicking and screaming." Lye leaned over to her. "*Please* pick kicking and screaming!" Lye begged in a whisper.

Capella's face was white as a ghost and her gaze was fixed off in the distance as she followed Lye away from the cell and down the prison hall. The hall floor was littered with the corpses of guards.

"It'll take us a few days to get back to the Cathedral," Lye said, his voice a song of joy. "We'll have lots of time to chat!"

A young guard suddenly came down the stairs and looked at Lye and Capella in horror. He drew his sword. "Stop! You're both under-"

Without breaking stride, Lye threw one of his daggers at the soldier. It pierced his neck to the hilt, pinning his body to the wall behind him. The soldier thrashed weakly as his body grew still.

"We're going to have so much fun on this trip," Lye cheered, plucking the dagger from the soldier's neck and letting his lifeless body fall to the ground.

Lye was giggling madly as he left the jail, followed by the nearly catatonic Capella.

It was late at night when Anri went to Gael's playroom. Her brother was still sitting up, having a tea party with his doll. Gael didn't keep particularly regular hours. He slept at whatever time of day or night that he felt like it.

She walked into the room with a small piece of parchment.

"Hello, Gael," She said in a somber voice, sliding down the wall and sitting near her brother. "How are you tonight?"

"Anri and I are great!" Gael cheered lifting his doll high over his head. "We've had a great day!"

Anri sighed. "I just finished what must be the most difficult proclamation I've ever had to write in my life."

"Difficult things are the things most worth doing," Gael said casually.

"I don't know about that," Anri muttered. "Do you want to hear it?" Anri asked, looking at the parchment.

"Sure. Anri likes it when people read to her," Gael replied.

Anri sighed and started to read aloud, "I, Princess Kairei vas Sirosse an Ithil, hereby put pen to paper to let all men of Gusteko and the realms beyond know of a terrible threat to our safety, our homes, and our very way of life. It is with a heavy heart... that I must admit that I fell under the spell of not one but *two*... terrible witches..."

Anri bit her lip and then forced herself to continue. "These nefarious individuals, Subaru Natsuki the Fire Witch and Emilia Half-Devil the Witch of Frost, bound me in an enchantment and made me the unwitting slave to their will. They sought to destroy our kingdom and would likely have succeeded if not for the unspeakable heroism... of the Witch Hunters under Gilbert de Ray and the august Princes of the Great Houses of Gusteko. After recognizing the savagery and the unspeakable malice of Subaru Natsuki who gleefully lured innocent men into an inferno to burn them alive, these brave men who should be recognized as heroes to our nation and even lands beyond, risked everything to free me from my bewitchment. They laid down their lives in the process. Lady Deann an Griest and Sir Duncan an Laertes saved my life by carrying my helpless body away from the carnage. I express my undying gratitude to each of them.

"The witches were enraged when their terrible enchantment was broken and they attempted to destroy everything around them including the entire city of Kocytos. They were forced to flee by the heroism of all present in the mayoral palace that day and the good men and women of Gusteko can take comfort in knowing that despite the grievous cost in lives by which this victory was bought, the witches are now fugitives from all nations. Their perfidy and their terrible malice laid bare to all.

"I urge all Houses of Gusteko and our friends and neighbors in the kingdoms beyond to unite in brotherhood in the face of this unimaginable danger. In this new age, when witches once again walk the land, we are only as strong as we are united and as weak as we are divided. To this end, I join my voice with the Lagunica sages' council and denounce Subaru Natsuki and Emilia Half-Devil as enemies of all humanity. They are not people but monsters and they must meet the fate reserved for any monster. My own violated spirit and the blood of the dead each cry out for justice. Let my words be heard across the land: The Witches... must die..." She trailed off, her face haunted.

"I like it!" Gael said matter-of-fact, his attention still riveted on his doll. "It's very exciting. It needs a happier ending though."

Anri's face crumpled. She buried her face in her hands and wept.

Subaru and Emilia lay in their bed that night. Subaru slept but Emilia was wide awake.

I can't stop thinking about what the witch told Subaru about the Sanctuary trials.

The Third Trial is a blur in my mind but I remember how it ended...

It was a nightmare. It was...

I think the fact that I thought it was just my worst fear brought to life is the only reason that I didn't go completely insane. If I'd known that it would happen... or even that it could happen, I think I might have broken into pieces on the spot...

Emilia closed her eyes and tried to sleep but rest eluded her. The Third Trial of the Sanctuary was a vague collection of images to her. She couldn't remember any of the context but she remembered how she felt at the end: the burning certainty, the taste of bile in her mouth, and the nauseating mix of absolute despair and seething hatred she had felt. She had spoken the words and she knew that from the bottom of her heart that she had meant every one:

"How could you do this? I trusted you! We all trusted you! You knew how I felt and you didn't care! I was wrong about you. You were never a hero. You were always a selfish, hateful little monster who only ever cared about what he wanted. You've taken everything away from me! Everything I worked for, everything I ever... ! You've ruined my life! ...I will never forgive you for this! I wish that we had never met! I hate you, Subaru!"

Well, that's where we stop for now. Our friends are all separated and in a very bad situation. We also have a whole lot of

new questions. What is "Korë's" game and why is she so interested in Subaru? What was Emilia's third trial warning her about and is it really inescapable? Where will Subaru's quest lead him and Emilia? Can the Book really restore her name or could Korë be lying? Why is the Witch Cult suddenly acting so friendly toward Subaru? For that matter, what is in that Vault that Capella wanted so badly?

Felt and Garfiel are about to go and make contact with a figure out of Rom's dark and violent past which could drag them into a brand new world that they barely understand. Beatrice and Puck (and Mimi) are done sitting around and are about to fight their way free, even without their magic. Crusch and Anastasia have been trapped by their former allies as they suddenly realize that there are whole levels to Lagunican politics that they never suspected.

Anri, I'm sad to say, is in serious danger. Her greatest enemy is much closer than she thinks although they're stymied at the moment thanks to Deann and Duncan. Subaru was very clever to tie Deann and Duncan to Anri but a treacherous weapon is ever dangerous to the hand. If Deann finds some way out of this trap, then Anri will suffer for it. Now they each have Gospels and neither knows that the other has one. This sounds like the beginning of one of those tragic plays that Anri likes so much.

As you can probably guess, this isn't the end of Anri's story. We'll be back to Gusteko at some point. Subaru has left his friend with a huge mess to deal with and you know that he's going to feel obligated to come back and fix it. She's in a bad situation right now.

I doubt that anyone is worried about Capella but it's fair to say that the Archbishop is in big trouble and she knows it. She has a lot of explaining to do to the person that she fears above all others and her punishment may be dire in the extreme. Although given what we know about her, it would be very hard to say that she doesn't deserve it.

I hope people weren't too disappointed in this arc. I worked really hard on it for a full nine months. I feel like there were fewer payoffs here than in the first three arcs because this marks a turning point in Subaru and Emilia's story. This arc was intended to set things up that will be paid off over the next several arcs. Honestly, I feel like the pacing in this arc was pretty bad as I was trying to manage things happening in multiple places and sometimes worried that I was just making time, waiting for the pieces to be where I needed them for the next scene.

I'm sure that people were expecting 'Dark Subaru' to show up again in a bigger way but Subaru hasn't been pushed that far into a corner this arc. Although, I think that now we're all starting to get the impression that maybe his love for Emilia and his family could be corrupted into something darker if he isn't careful. He's also only discovered the barest hint of what Pridebreaker is really capable of. I can tell you in confidence that he's using the power almost completely sideways of how it was intended to be used.

We never actually found out what happened in the forest this arc, did we? Don't worry. The battle between witches and that strange door will be revisited in due time. As Korë warned us, the seals are weakening and the witches are preparing for their long awaited return. Subaru will begin to learn why he's so fascinating to them.

I wish that I could have gone into more detail about Capella's plan, how simplistic and rudimentary it was and how quickly it all went sideways but there was really no place to insert it in the text. If I had Capella reminisce about her failures, her narcissism would obscure all the completely idiotic decisions that she had actually made.

Capella's plan was pretty basic: Scare Anri enough and she would eventually decide that she had no choice but to open the Vault. At first, it went pretty well. Capella met Anri in Pardochel, pretending to be a Shadow using the Gospel to mislead people, and started sneaking Anri out at night and taking her fun places. Basically, playing 'cool big sis' to Anri since her other guards were so much older. Anri took to her right away and trusted her much more quickly than she should have. Then Malcolm hired the Assassin's Guild to kill his rivals including Anri. As long as Capella had the Gospel she was playing Anri and her guards like a fiddle.

Capella saw a golden opportunity to tighten the screws on Anri. Capella is probably the smartest of the Archbishops but that's not saying very much. She made the mistake of confusing the Gospel's insight and planning for her own. She lent her Gospel to Malcolm thinking that she'd be fine without it and knowing that Malcolm would use it to push Siros right up to the wall. This is where Capella first discovered that she was way out of her depth. She's a sociopath and her utilitarian view of other people alienated Anri very quickly once she no longer had the Gospel to guide her. Also, a more clever infiltrator would have been prepared with assistants to help her maintain her cover, but Capella doesn't value other people so she didn't think of that. This meant that Capella had to actually go off and do errands for Anri like sending her letters out or finding a dragon to pull the wagon to prevent Anri from becoming suspicious, despite Capella having much preferred to have given the job to one of her Assassins while she followed Anri in secret.

I would have liked to have gone into detail about just how stupid Capella's entire plan was and how it was a minor miracle that it all didn't unravel as soon as she gave away the Gospel but it just didn't fit in the story.

Also, I have a question: Sooner or later I intend to end this story. That doesn't mean that there might not be more stories about Subaru and Emilia's journey to tell but this particular journey will have a definitive end at some point. I've written nothing but Subaru and Emilia for close to twelve months this year and I really need to devote some time to some other projects of mine. I'm just curious, if I published a non fanfiction web novel, would anyone be interested in reading it? I'm not sure what the best sites are to publish original works but I just wondered how many people would be interested in giving some of my own works a chance. I do love having an audience but it's hard to take pride in a story that piggybacks off someone else's work.

Wow, you mean people actually made it to the end of this? What an amazing thing.

So, everyone has been so encouraging and patient the whole time that they've been waiting for this arc that I felt I owed everyone an explanation for what happened here. I can't honestly say that I think this is my best work (although it is certainly my longest. It's longer than most of the books in Harry Potter actually. I think I need professional help) but

I'm hoping that writing this book might have taught me a few lessons and made me a better writer.

Anyway so, the reason this arc took so long to get out is because everything went sideways when I was getting ready to publish arc 3 and decided that there was a serious problem with it. In my original plan, arc 3 was a 5 chapter arc and about 100k words. The spirits would have been taken by Reinhard at the end of chapter 3, Emilia would have tried to send Subaru away while they were in the Elier Forest, then he would meet Korë, who was actually a different character at the time, both in chapter four. Then Emilia and Subaru would sneak into the capitol in chapter 5 and rescue the spirits with help from Ram, who simply doesn't care if Subaru was brainwashed or not. Roswaal told her to serve him so that's what she's going to do. Subaru and Emilia would have used bombs as a distraction to sneak into the Astrea manor and rescue the spirits. This would earn Puck and Beatrice's trust for Emilia. Felt would begin to have second thoughts about her memories being accurate as well.

I mulled it over and decided that it just didn't work. There was simply no point in taking the spirits away only to give them back two chapters later. Felt had the same problem. I couldn't have her turn around on her doubts of Emilia that quickly without the brief break in their friendship feeling like a waste of everybody's time. If the separation was going to have any meaning at all, I need to get them apart for a really serious chunk of time. So I decided to end the arc with Reinhard capturing them and I devoted more time in arc 3 to Subaru and Emilia's wandering the plains with the spirits.

The problem was, this left me with the tail end of an arc that didn't really fit anywhere. Obviously, some things needed to be given to our heroes and some things needed to be explained to our characters so that we could begin the quest for the Book of Wisdom in the next arc. Most importantly, Emilia needed to develop further. She absolutely had to discover her own power and step up as being truly Subaru's partner. But the pieces that I had left in the arc didn't naturally have a climax or a three arc structure.

This left me in the rather tricky position of having to add, not a subplot to my established storyline but needing to add a main plot whose primary goal was simply to keep things happening while we waited for all the pieces to be put in the right locations to begin arc 5.

This, of course, was very hard. A reader can almost always tell if the plot is artificial or just making time. I tried a bunch of different angles. At one point, Subaru became an underworld kingpin and you can see the relics of that plot in his dealings with the smugglers. I really loved that plot and I fought like hell to keep it in but ultimately I had to accept that it just didn't work in this story and take it out. Lady Koi and Senko were fun characters to write with and I hope you get to meet them someday.

A second plot I tried to write had Subaru and Emilia breaking into a jail to rescue the spirits while Julius was guarding them.

In another plot, Subaru managed to blackmail Elsa and Meili into betraying Capella and working for him as his personal secret hit squad (without Emilia knowing) and later he went on to use mabeasts to defend Arlem village against Montefort's soldiers.

Another draft had Emilia, Subaru, and Julius trapped inside Ganaks while Malcolm and Griest put it under siege. The three had to work together to repel the invaders and they ended up becoming friends.

The character who ultimately became Korë was hard. I considered almost ten different characters when I was trying to decide who Subaru would meet to play exposition fairy. Ultimately, I decided that her identity wouldn't be initially known to the reader but I still needed to know who she was. I'm sure that you can guess a few of the characters I considered but I think that some of them would surprise you.

My personal favorite was when I briefly considered letting Capella fulfill Korë's role, forced to help out Subaru because the Gospel told her to. This was the first time that Capella was even considered as a character for this story. It was my favorite draft of this scene because both of these characters broke the fourth wall in that scene and chewed the writer out for trying to force them to do things that they would never do, just to move the plot in the desired direction.

After this happened, I decided that I really needed to get some sleep...

A lot of these plots were actually really fun but I needed to drop them because they involved Subaru going just too far into the darkside. I don't think Subaru has been pushed far enough over the edge to take that plunge. At least not yet.

Anri was a late addition and she went through a lot of variations. Initially, she was a grandmother and a former Witch Cultist who was in hiding to protect her family from the Cult's vengeance. She slowly transformed into a Princess in hiding as Gusteko became more important to the draft. Victoire also went through a lot of revisions, starting out as two different characters, and although she was always a character in disguise who was trying to manipulate our heroes, who she actually was and what she was after changed from draft to draft. Capella wasn't even introduced as a character until a draft that started in mid October. That's how much flux this story went through.

I spent almost the entire nine months focusing on Emilia's character arc. I knew that somehow her journey would lead her from telling Subaru to leave her 'for his own good' to demanding that Subaru acknowledge her as his equal and partner. However, the journey was very difficult to write.

A personal pet peeve of mine is damsels in distress. Your main characters should never be damseled. Ever. If you need a damsel, invent a side character like Anri to do the job. If you decide to make a main character helpless and leave them waiting for rescue, you're making it very hard for the reader to take that character seriously as anything other than 'the love interest.' Don't even get me started on canon Regulus and Emilia encounter in the web novel which made me face palm repeatedly.

Avoiding 'damseling' sounds simple in principle but it can be very tricky to do in practice. If you want to give one

character a big moment of badass, then you have to move the other characters off stage to give them space for it, and sometimes that's hard to do without feeling contrived.

I spent months polishing Subaru and Emilia's big fight at the cottage and I think it came out more or less alright. I view this situation as when Emilia starts to learn that she can't force things on Subaru that he doesn't want. Loving someone is not a license to patronize them or make decisions on their behalf. Subaru in turn learns the same lesson when they have their second big fight before rescuing Anri. This one I'm worried didn't come out so well. I spent months writing her speech but I was never satisfied with it. I think it's OK, I guess. I hope that it's OK but that scene is really supposed to Emilia's crowning moment of awesome for this arc (and the next few actually. She'll still get character development in the future but this was definitely 'the Emilia arc.') and I'm worried that it just didn't hit as hard as I wanted it to.

Like I said, relationship drama isn't my strong suit. I spent the better part of a year working on Emilia's arc and I still wasn't really satisfied but I finally realized that there was a limit. If I'd worked on it for another eighteen months, could I have made this story better?

Well maybe. Probably in fact. But would I have ever been satisfied with it?

Anyway, I can't stand here and say this was my best work but I did work really hard on it and I hope you all enjoyed it, at least a little.

You'll be waiting a while for arc 5 obviously, but I might have a smaller treat for you before that. Here's hoping!

Once again, thank you all so much for all the wonderful feedback you've written this year. I reread those reviews more often than I'd really be comfortable admitting.

***Chapter 26*: Update**

Hey guys

No this isn't Arc 5. Wouldn't it be amazing if I could write that fast?

This is pretty close to the anniversary of my first publish on this site and I wanted to mark the occasion.

This has been a really special experience for me. I've been writing since I was a little kid and I've certainly had people read my work in the past but I never got the impression that anyone particularly enjoyed reading my work. They were just doing something nice for me by fighting their way through it. Nobody had ever asked me for more of it. When the folks here told me that they not only liked my writing but they actually wanted to read more of it, it was a whole new world for me.

So thank you. Thank you for all the encouragement and all the reviews and all the feedback. It really means a lot to me.

This is just a little update. I wanted to tell everyone that I had given myself a month off writing this story after a pretty hectic year of doing nothing but writing this story and now I'm going to get busy again.

I'll be writing arc 5 and I'll also be working on a few side projects as well.

I've created an account on Royal Road to publish a few other things. Not sure if this is the best site to use but I'm going to give it a try for now. If it doesn't work out, I'll find someplace else.

So far I've placed a short little story I call 'Kyron' on this site. It let me play around with some concepts of magic and worldbuilding that I liked so I could see if they worked. I actually really liked the story but I don't think that it would work blown up to novel or series length, at least not without some changes to the character and world. So sadly, I don't think we'll be following this character on his journey right now. I like a lot of the concepts but it just didn't become what I wanted. Still, I think that it was a nice little story as it is so it's being offered for your reading pleasure.

(I can't post a clickable link here so just go to royal road and then make this the URL suffix.) /fiction/50625/kyron

Or just do a search for 'author name' HollowSong16 using the advanced search option. Don't try to search for the title. I tried it. For some reason, it doesn't work.

Also, I figured I'd pitch a few ideas for other stories that I'm considering writing to see if any of them spark audience interest.

Well, I hope folks are still enjoying the story and please let me know if any of these story ideas intrigue you.

Currently I'm taking notes for a traditional epic fantasy in a strange and largely uncharted world and some other notes for a dark mystery novel that has strains of Twin Peaks and Stranger Things.

Also, I might at some point start writing a What IF story for re:zero where we find out how different things could have been in arc 4 if Emilia and Subaru had made just a FEW different choices so let me know if you'd be interested in that too.

"I'll come back for you. I swear that I will. I swear that I'll come back for you."

These were the last words that Elwei's mother ever said to him before she left her small child to be cared for by a village of elves. The boy grew up quickly under the tutelage of the elves and he developed an amazing facility for crafts,

especially the shaping of metals. The elves lived deep in the forest, desperately trying to avoid contact with the humans who hated and feared them. Growing up, Elwei never understood why the elves were so adamant that he must sleep throughout every day and that he only emerge from his room at night.

One day, Elwei discovers that he possesses a strange magic: his strength grows to enormous heights as the sun climbs the sky and fades away as it sets. He even discovers that he can generate great heat during the brightest part of the day.

When his village is destroyed by wicked humans, Elwei is left orphaned and alone. He is thrust into a world of humans that should feel familiar but is strangely alien to him. He supports himself by working as a traveling weaponsmith. He uses the heat produced by his magic to create exceptionally high quality steel and his weapons and armor are highly prized treasures. This has led him to be viewed as a valuable asset by the powerful, whether he likes it or not. Tempered steel weapons in a world of crudely forged iron give any force an overwhelming advantage in battle. Elwei keeps moving, always moving, trying to conceal his powers and his origins from a world that hates and fears both magic and the 'elf-touched.' Elwei has one goal: Family. He seeks to find another elven village, hidden somewhere on this world, and spend the rest of his life with what he views as his own people.

Whatever happened to the elves? Not so long ago, they ruled the entire world, as numberless as the stars. Then they almost all vanished, leaving the humans to build a society in the bones of their civilization. Elwei's journey will lead him to uncover the mysteries of their tragic fall.

Also, it seems very strange that the elves of Elwei's village should so readily accept a human child.

Secretly, Elwei is also searching for his mother. He wants to know how she convinced the elves to take in a little human boy and why she abandoned him all those years ago.

Eurydice was raised by her grandmother ever since she was a baby because her parents died in a car accident. Nearly an adult, the sickly Eurydice has just buried her grandmother. She only has one picture of her mother and none at all of her father. Imagine her shock when she accidentally breaks the picture frame and finds out that the photo is just a picture cut out of a magazine, dated to the day that her grandmother told her that she had been born. Now Eurydice is on a quest to find who she is and where she comes from. She and her friends will journey into a small town with a very dark secret. Nobody wants her digging up the secrets of the past or what really happened on that dark day all those years ago.

Eurydice will quickly learn that she looks just like a girl named Crystal who disappeared in the vast, unmapped caverns beneath the town along with three other teens. Everyone assures Eurydice that she can't possibly be Crystal's daughter. Crystal died two years before Eurydice was born.

And maybe there are reasons that she wouldn't want to be Crystal's daughter anyway...

Eurydice's investigation into her own history will lead her and her friends into great danger and a series of strange and inexplicable happenings. But what's really going on in the town? Is it the legend of a witch's curse come to life or is it nothing more than a community determined to protect its secrets at all costs?

So these are the stories I'm considering right now and of course all the particulars are subject to change as the stories develop but I'm curious if any of these ideas speak to you. I already have a rough outline for Arc 5 and am working on refining it.

***Chapter 27*: Chapter 27**

Hey guys. Me again.

So you probably have two questions right now: 'Is this Arc 5' and 'Is this an April Fools' prank?'

The answers to those questions are 'no' and 'no.'

I've been struggling to write lately as none of the stories are coming together in my head. This includes both the original works I've been ruminating on, which both require a substantial amount of worldbuilding before I can really get started, and of course Arc 5. The arc is tricky because it might be the most ambitious thing I've ever tried writing due to the sheer number of plotlines and characters that needs to be balanced.

I have Subaru and Emilia who are searching for the Book, Felt, Garfiel, and Priscilla who are on a transcontinental roadtrip looking for Subaru, Beatrice, Puck, (Julius,) and Mimi who are planning their prison break, Crusch and Anastasia who are determined to break free of their blackmailers, the Triumvirate who saw everything blow up in their face at the last minute and are desperately trying to hold onto their power and influence in the face of rapidly spreading riots and protests, and Anri up north who's trying to clean up a huge mess bequeathed to her by Arc 4. Factor in a few characters you haven't met yet and I'm already up to seven distinct plot lines to balance. Naturally these plot lines won't all get equal time and attention but they do need to be properly developed and balanced and that does spread me out pretty thin.

Priscilla and Mimi were both very difficult to deal with because they were essentially one note characters and not multi-dimensional characters that were easy to spend a lot of time with. I ended up writing a full biography of Priscilla to uncover the layers of her troubled history and find traits that we could root for during a long journey together. I ended up writing her as not only an alpha bitch with a magical type of luck but as a cunning woman forged in the chaos of Vollachian politics who was capable of shifting from a violent shrew to a charming woman and master manipulator at

the drop of a hat as needed. Priscilla is first and foremost a survivor who is determined to come out on top. Only the most perceptive people can see through all of Priscilla's artifices. The fact that she's the only one who seems capable of doing this drives Felt right up the god damn wall.

I haven't written a bio for Mimi yet but she needs some depth beyond 'cheerful genki neko' before their prison break gets anywhere.

I won't spoil Subaru and Emilia's journey for you yet but trust me, things are going to get *very* complicated.

Anyway, because I was struggling so much to write recently, I decided to reset and try something different. I spent the past two weeks working on a What If story where I explore what would have happened during my Arc 4 if a single decision had been made differently. My original plan was to publish it on April 1st since that seems like a good day for What if stories (and is also Subaru's birthday I just remembered).

However, I was still adding new plot elements and twists just last night so I think that I'm going to take a little more time and polish the story before publishing it sometime this month. That said, I'd hate to give you nothing to mark the day so in lieu of the new Omake, please accept this: a short flash fiction I wrote some years ago. I have no idea *what* I was smoking at the time but I stumbled across it recently and found it amusing enough to rescue. I remember writing this as a minor bit of worldbuilding for something completely different and then the situation just ran away with me and I kept spitting words down on the page as surprised as anyone else by what those words actually were.

In any event, thanks as always for the consistent support and feedback you've been providing. I read last night that apparently Tappei got his start writing fanfiction for the Familiar of Zero.

I have to admit I found that to be encouraging since it's hard for me to take a whole lot of pride in fanfiction (despite how addicted I've become to having an actual audience who likes my writing. Thanks again for that by the way). Still, it's nice to hear that someone else started out with fanfiction and then found an audience to enjoy their own original work.

Anyway, happy April. Thanks as always for your feedback and encouragement and I'll have something new for you to read sometime this month. I'll put a link to the new Omake here when it's published.

If one goes a mere twenty blocks from the Imperial Palace, one will encounter stately Lycroft University, home to the nearly fifty million students studying at any given time in the Imperial Capital. In keeping with the Emperor's belief in growth through competition, the University is divided up into many Houses and fraternities who specialize in different studies and proficiencies. It is no exaggeration to say that which House a student joins at University is at least as important to their future as their field of study. Any aspiring alchemist seeks to join the Methel House whose members specialize in some of the most sophisticated chemistry in the Empire as well as regular parties featuring the finest brewed liquor available anywhere. Pisces House is a natural draw for those exploring a military career, having fielded many exceptional officers in the Imperial Navy who still maintain active relationships with the House in a mentoring capacity. Roddick House has a proud tradition of athletic celebrities, Cade House specializes in painting.

Foxquat House is perhaps the least admirable house on the entire campus. Having never excelled at anything in particular, the House became known informally as the House to which losers applied once they had been rejected everywhere else. This reputation was not helped by the fact that Foxquat House had been built literally over the school's Metro station for the city monorail. At least once an hour, one can expect the entire building to shake like a dog getting out of the bath due to arriving or departing trains.

The practice of dumping assorted losers at Foxquat House continued for several centuries until the enrollment of one Willard Fisk, an aspiring alchemist who through sheer dogged determinism discovered a mathematical procedure which expressed the physical attractiveness of any person as a single one to ten number.

This legendary achievement transformed the fortunes of Foxquat House overnight. No longer considered a dormitory for the dregs and lowest members of society, it was immediately re-branded as the natural home for the horniest men and women on campus. The House promptly embraced a new motto, proudly emblazoned on a banner stretched across the exit of Metro Station below their building: "We all get off here."

Willard Fisk was immediately hailed as a hero by his brothers and sisters of Foxquat. Sadly, this reputation did not last long as Willard was expelled from University a few months later during his third year. For his senior project, Willard had been performing experiments in attempting to utilize organosulfur compounds in an attempt to develop more powerful artificial flavors. During an ill-advised experiment where he attempted to 'crack' the trimer trithioacetone, Willard produced a compound with an intensely foul odor. So foul that it caused the complete evacuation of the campus for miles in every direction. Experiencing a spontaneous outbreak of mass vomiting, both students and faculties fled the campus en-mass. Except for the local smoker's club who were heard to ask what all the fuss was about.

The entire campus was evacuated while chemical safety crews worked feverishly to try to contain the damage. These crews discovered to their frustration that water and similar cleaning agents did not appear to dilute the smell but only to spread it around further. Finally, the chemical crew took a flamethrower to the entire lab in a desperate effort to contain the odor.

Willard Fisk was sharply reprimanded by the University governing council and placed on probation. This probation would last two weeks until Willard Fisk performed the exact same experiment *again* in an effort to figure out where he'd gone wrong the first time. The results of the experiment were identical and Willard Fisk was unanimously expelled by the University board, having deeply touched the lives of everyone on campus in a way that few students could ever hope to replicate.

Willard Fisk was gone but his legacy lived on. To this day, Foxquat House has specialized in keeping up-to-date records of the sexual attractiveness score of every one of the more than reasonably famous people among the Imperium's five

hundred billion citizens. This is done voluntarily by members of the House as a point of pride. Dedicated students devote their own free time to combing through every glamour magazine, porn film, and shopping catalog to ensure that their ratings were as up to date as possible. No new starlet or musician could be on the scene for more than a few weeks before their appearance would be cataloged and filed in the House's records. As a result of this tireless pursuit, Foxquat House prides itself on the greatest collection of skin magazines in the modern Empire.

The musician Ella Sharpe, a songstress famous both for her ballad "Dreaming that we never met" and for her notably different sized nostrils, was once heard to remark that it was only after she discovered that she had been given an official 'score' by Foxquat House that she understood that she had truly 'arrived' as a successful musician.

She also reported that it was only after she viewed her own lamentably low attractiveness score that she understood why she was so often stood up on dates.

Foxquat House has maintained this practice of documenting the sexual desirability of the general public for generations. The alumni of the House claim that it is a sacred calling, worthy of being pursued with the same fervor as artist excellence or athletic achievement.

The University administration has stated that it is impossible to know if even the House members take themselves seriously at this point.

Princess Ico has caused the students of Foxquat House much consternation. Princess Ico, first of her name, Lady of the EstLands, and the White Rose of the Empire was also sometimes very unofficially referred to as the Frost Princess due to her colorless hair and her remarkably pale skin. This title has remained unofficial despite the notably drunk Duke Whembly attempting to present her with it at a state banquet.

The Princess responded to this unrequested 'description' of her appearance by placing a curse on the Duke which made him vomit a mixture of slugs and salt for three days straight. On reflection of the incident, the Duke was later wont to say that, on the whole, he had preferred the slugs to the salt.

Princess Ico's unusual looks sharply divided the members of Foxquat House. One faction claimed that her only average attractiveness score was far too low and that her almost impossibly regular features should place her at the very top of the rankings. Others argued that it was this very impossible perfection that made her repulsive due to crossing the line into the uncanny valley. The debate continued for weeks with neither side conceding ground.

Ultimately, drastic measures were called for.

Since weapons are not allowed on Campus, duels between the factions of Foxquat House had to be performed much more creatively. There were pie-eating contests, video game tournaments, beer pong, and even one attempt to physically 'out fuck' the other which was ruled a draw after the University Dean came across the combatants still struggling together in the bushes during his morning constitutional.

This civil war, which threatened to tear the famous porno fraternity apart was ultimately resolved when Norquist Blythe and his loving (but no strings attached) significant other, Glenda Hoogkins took control over a deeply divided House leadership and narrowly voted to adjust the Princess's score slightly higher, largely to avoid offending the Princess or the Emperor. This was a decision that most House members ultimately conceded was wise.

It is unknown what Princess Ico thought about any of theses incidents or if she was indeed even aware of the enormous impact that her mere appearance had on the strange Foxquat House. At one point, a reporter named Skip Channing, an alumni of Foxquat House, inquired what the Princess thought of the infamous Foxquat civil war. Upon receiving a confused reply from the Princess, Channing proceeded to explain the origins and nature of the war. He then inquired if she had an opinion of the incident and what her own sexual attractiveness score should be. This was probably not wise as in response the Princess cast a spell making Channing's nose hairs six feet long.